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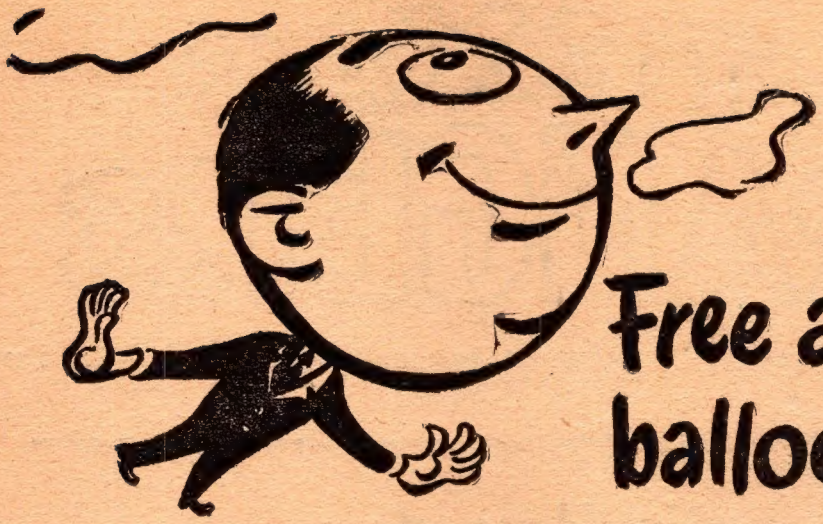

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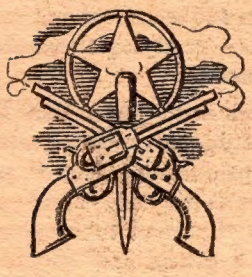
TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 35, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JUNE, 1949

COMPLETE NOVEL

The Austin Marauders



By Jackson Cole

When trouble comes hunting for hard-fighting Jim Hatfield, he's ready to meet it with flaming law guns and unflinching courage! The ace of Rangers faces outlaw lead when he bucks a building czar! 9

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Littlejohn takes a pasear on a trouble trail in order to foil a range plot

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THE MODERN RANGERS.....*by Don Glassman* 68
The story of today's Texas Rangers—who follow their own unwritten code!

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HIYA, gals and galluses! Here's a big bargain in reading—a two-bit word in a 15-cent magazine. The double-jointed word is Monosodium Glutamate. Ever hear of it?

Neither did I, until right recent. It's being sold in grocery stores, under the name MSG, and is used to make food taste better by increasing the flavor. And now we're told that it's been used for quite a long spell in canned soup and various restaurant vittles.

Like a heap of other modern "discoveries," this whitish powder is as old as the hills. I'll tell you how I found that out. A good many years back we had a Chinese cook called Sam Wing, on a ranch outfit. Sam was a mysterious cuss, specially in his cook shack job.

On a back shelf, in a box with Chinese characters on it, he kept some powdery stuff that he sprinkled in stews, hash, garden sass and such. I never did know what it was, not then. Old Sam, when pinned down, let on as how it was a kind of seaweed.

I forgot all about that strange box and Sam's easy-to-eat grub, until I came onto this "new" MSG stuff, and was told that the Chinese have used it for ages. Only they got it out of—yep, seaweed! Now it's produced from various grains and sugar beets.

Fancy Figures

Statistics is a hard word to pronounce and even harder to believe, real often. The latest fancy figures to arouse my doubts is that nearly a half-million tons of silt is dumped daily behind Boulder (Hoover) Dam by the Colorado River. The exact amount given is 400,000 tons.

Now that's a big batch of mud, when you come to think about it, enough to sink about ten battleships the size of the USS Missouri or Iowa. I pick battleships for the comparison, because the Navy happens to be making the silt tests, up at the head of Lake Mead.

I'd like to know three things. One is, how come the Navy is on this peculiar job? Also, how do they capture, measure and weigh mud—wet or dry? And finally, what would 400,000 tons of mud look like if spread out somewhere? Plain diggin' dirt, I've always heard, averages a ton per cubic yard, which is 3 x 3 x 3 feet in dimensions.

That's a Lot of Mud

If Colorado silt hefts the same, 400,000 ton-yards would cover approximately 40 acres one foot deep, according to my arithmetic, in one day. In a year's time, there'd be enough to put a one-foot layer on close to 15,000 acres, which is more acre-feet of mud than the entire State of Arizona is getting in water out of the Colorado River at present! The most Arizona ever can take, under the present set-up, is 50,000 acre-feet annually.

If such is the case, Arizona is getting the dirty end of the deal—more mud than water.

There's quite a hullabaloo about dividing Colorado River water nowadays. The City of Los Angeles is allowed more than twice the State of Arizona. While the ruckus goes on, more damsites are being explored, above and below Boulder Dam.

The Colorado will eventually be a chain of clear lakes, according to Bureau of Reclamation plans, with most of the silt trapped by damming the various muddy tributaries. The day might be when they find some way to scoop out the mud and make use of it on erosion-stripped land, where it comes from.

In the meantime, I wish somebody'd check over the Navy's figures. They look mighty muddy to me.

The Appaloosa

Here's some horse palaver that might clear up some muddy ideas concerning that curious critter called the Appaloosa. I came onto a mare and colt at a fence corner awhile back,

both with irregular spotty rumps, and while I admired 'em, along came the ranch-owner.

He told me some things about the Appaloosa I never knew before. One thing had to do with the origin of the word. It started, he said, in the Palouse Indian country, where the strain was first called "Palouse horses." Later, it went to Apalouse, Apaloocha and now a group of breeders have standardized the name to Appaloosa.

These "spot ponies" are of all colors, and identified mainly by the rump spots of white, black, bay, gray, roan, chestnut or sorrel red. Appaloosas, since frontier days, have been noted for endurance and speed.

Their origin is lost in antiquity. Legend claims that Mongol hordes rode them out of Asia and the Spaniards brought them to America. The mixed color sometimes shows in the tail, which is short and scant. In old days they were spoken of by cowboys as "rat-tailed Appaloochas."

My Recipe for Chili

Kind Reader Emil Thiessen of Everett, Washington, writes in to say he enjoyed what I had to say awhile back about the Olympic Peninsula wilderness, but points out a mistake I made in calling Skokomish River the Skykomish, which latter river is in another part of his State. Thank you, Emil. Another mistake I make sometimes is biting off more'n I can chew.

That's what I did, a year or so back, when I offered to send a genuine Mexican-style recipe for making chili sauce, to folks that would send in the usual stamped, self-addressed envelope with their requests.

What I ought to have done was to turn the job over to the government printing office. I never realized, until letters poured in from everywhere, how many of you friends and customers hankered for sure-enough chili. I was plumb swamped with chili orders. I did my darndest to answer everybody. But the time's come to call a halt. No more chili letters, please, gals and galluses! I'm wore down to a hot tamale husk. Hereafter, when I make any for-free offer thataway, I reckon I'd better put a time limit on it.

While we're on the subject, how about a dozen or so of you letting me know how your chili frijoles or chili con carne came out? Or mebbe inviting me to drop around to sample some?

Big John, an outdoor pal of mine that I've

(Continued on page 91)

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OPIUM SMUGGLERS MEET THEIR MATCH WHEN...

HOMEWARD BOUND AFTER A DAY AT TIJUANA, SENATOR BLAIK AND HIS DAUGHTER STOP AT THE BORDER FOR ROUTINE CUSTOM INSPECTION...

AMAZING! YOU SAY THEY PUT IT IN THE TIRE AT THAT PARKING LOT?
EXACTLY! AND TONIGHT THE GANG AT THIS END WILL TRY TO NAB IT. MAY I USE YOUR 'PHONE?

THAT'S THAT. WELL, YOU FOLKS HAVE YOUR DINNER. I'LL BE BACK ABOUT NIGHTFALL
WHY NOT STAY AND HAVE A SNACK WITH US?
SURE, COME UPSTAIRS AND FRESHEN UP

THIS BLADE SURE MAKES SHORT WORK OF WHISKERS. MY FACE FEELS GREAT!
I'M SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

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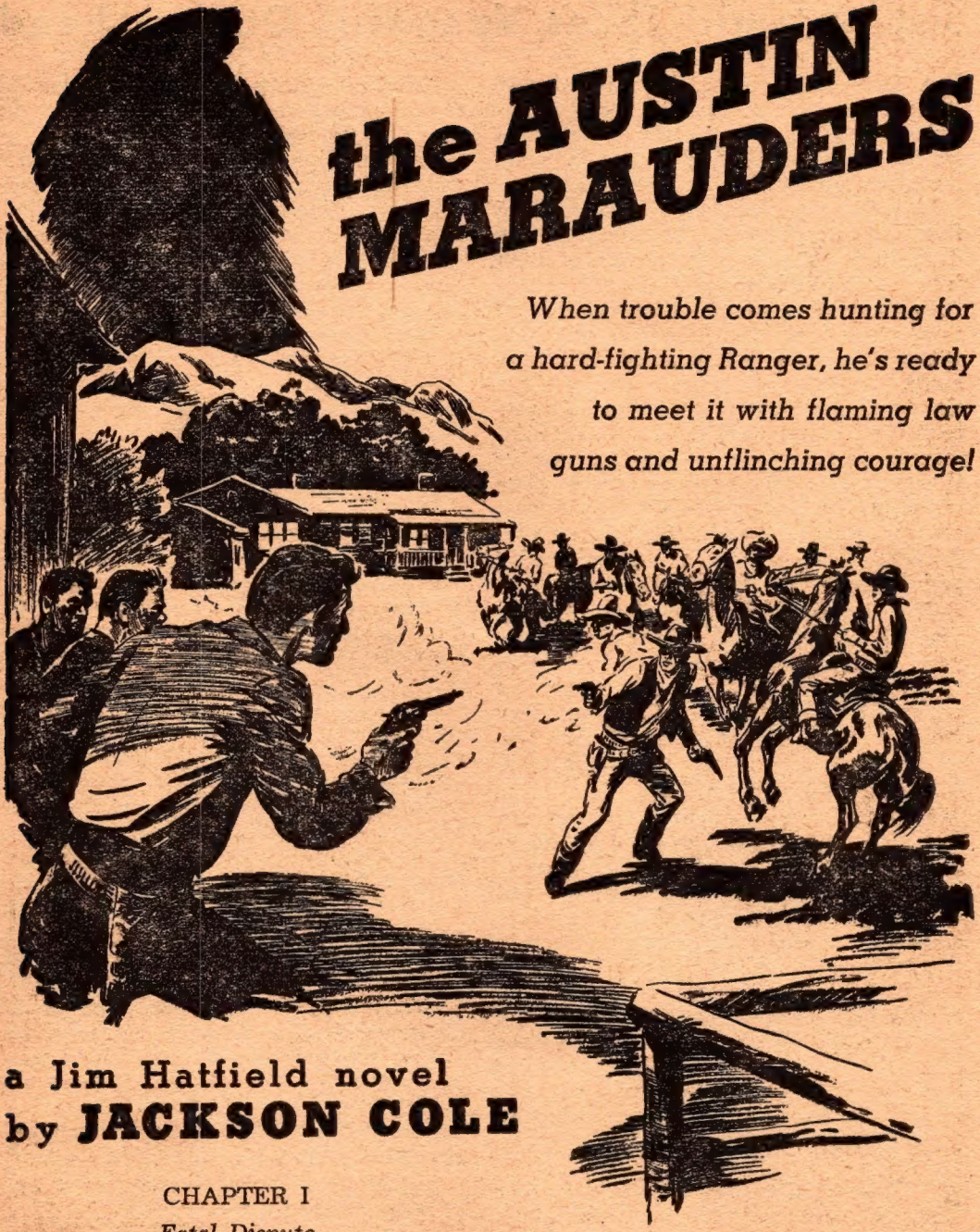


a Jim Hatfield novel
by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Fatal Dispute

THE bland moon silvered the winding ribbon of the Colorado as it curved around Austin, capital of the Lone Star empire. Lights flickered in the town, which spread over a sequence of low hills and natural terraces. Higher reaches stretched northwest along the river which cut through the settlement in a deep bed, its scarred banks reminding the citizens what raging floodwaters could do.

This was the pulsing heart of Texas,

Jim Hatfield Faces Vengeful Outlaw Lead

The state government, institutions and schools were here. Massive stone structures lined Congress Avenue, while on lateral ways stood fine homes in wide lawns roofed by stately shade trees.

It was late, and most hard-working folk had retired to rest for the following day's toil. But in various places men were awake and active.

One of these was on the east side of town, bordering the Mexican quarters, where stood a low building of native limestone. In the front portion of the place the large public bar and dancehall was crowded with revelers. Land speculators, businessmen from the east coast, in the capital to further their affairs, cowboys, hunters and ranchers from the west country, gamblers and other gentry who preyed on the unwary, young women in gay dresses, rubbed elbows here.

The strains of the guitars and fiddles reached to the private dining room at the rear of the establishment. Three men there sat at a white-clothed table on which stood the remains of a feast. They were smoking Cuban cheroots and two were drinking wine after the rich meal they had just consumed.

The third man commanded more than ordinary attention. He was a large, beefy man, with a dark complexion. Habitually he held his head down on one side, and his drooping jowls brushed a wide white collar now as he watched a guest across the table. His fat hands were folded on the cloth and a big solitaire diamond sparkled in its gold setting on a hairy digit. In his white stock shone another expensive jewel. All his raiment was fine—his brown jacket, ruffled shirt and striped trousers. His thinnish hair was pomaded to his massive head.

CYRUS ISBELL exuded power. He had an easy manner, and his dark eyes held steady. Tiny drops of moisture stood out on his brow. He unfolded his hands and reached into the dish of French chocolates before him, popped a large cream into his mouth and closed upon it. His jowls worked almost imperceptibly as he chewed at the candy.

"That's the story, Gregory," he drawled to the man across the table. "How do you like my idea?"

Isbell's dinner guest, so addressed, carefully set down his thin-shanked crystal glass. The wine rippled and spilled, for his hand was shaking. This Gregory was a man of about fifty, whose hair was gray at the temples. He allowed his gaze to meet Isbell's.

"I couldn't do business on that basis, Isbell!" He tried to control rising anger, but as he spoke his rage carried him away and his voice grew shriller. "I'm an honest contractor and what you suggest is the worst kind of thievery." He slammed his fist on the table.

"Careful," warned Isbell, and glanced around the room as if there might be listeners.

Plush hangings drooped from the low ceiling. The lamps were shaded. The floor-length curtains at the window behind Gregory stirred faintly. That was all.

Isbell flicked his narrowed eyes to the third member of the party who rose and glided to the closed door. His small figure and quick movements were remindful of those of an active flea. Juan Enriquez, known as *El Chicaro*, the Pea, because of his diminutive size, was always obedient to Isbell's desires. He was scarcely five feet tall in his pliant velvet, his hair was raven-black, and his skin sallow. Pearly teeth showed between his thin, parted lips.

Either Isbell's menacing voice or *El Chicaro's* actions alarmed Gregory, for the contractor jumped up, kicking over his chair.

"Sit down," ordered Isbell.

"Never again with a rascal like you!" shouted Gregory, starting for the door.

El Chicaro blocked the way, but a look of fear crossed his face.

Isbell thrust a pudgy hand inside his jacket, whipped out a short-barreled Colt revolver. His eyes were wide and savage as he fired into Gregory. The explosion snarled in the room and *El Chicaro's* jaw sagged as Gregory gasped, flexed back and crumpled to the red carpet.

When He Bucks a Building Materials Czar!

Music from the bar was gay as a man died in the back parlor.

Isbell moved then with businesslike celerity.

"Get out there and make sure nobody interferes," he ordered.

El Chicaro was glad to slip into the hall, shutting the door. Isbell seized the dying contractor and dragged him to a back window, brushing aside the curtains.

"Vesper!" he called softly.

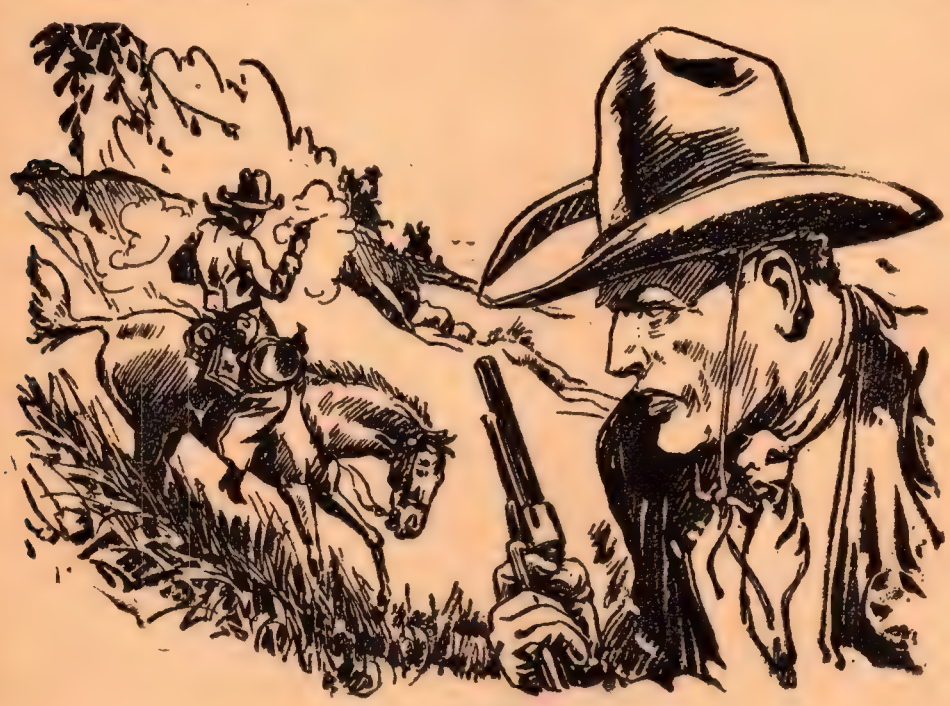
The vague figure of a thin man, with fierce, glowing eyes in a pink-tinged face materialized outside.

"I was ready," he snarled, "Yuh should have let me handle him."

"He stampeded," replied Isbell coolly. "I had to stop him. Don't worry. I've got plenty more for you. Hustle—take him away quickly."

Isbell hoisted the victim through the window to his accomplice. Then he swung to make certain no tell-tale clues to tragedy remained in the room.

ASA "ACE" LOCKHART, expert horse handler and bronc stomper, rode slowly along the ridge path overlooking the valley of Walnut Creek. He was hunting for bands of Deecee mustangs which had been running through here. Like many solitary souls who spend most of their lives in the open,



JIM HATFIELD

Lockhart had formed the habit of talking to his chestnut gelding, Tuffy, just as though the fine animal were another human being.

"Yes suh, Tuffy," he was remarking now, "she's the prettiest, sweetest girl we'll ever meet."

More and more his conversations with his equine comrade had recently been turning to Claire Cargill, the twenty-year-old daughter of the rancher, Dillard Cargill. Cargill, for whom Lockhart was now working, was owner of the D C Ranch on Walnut Creek, ten miles northwest of Austin. The brand, made up of the boss' initials, was familiarly re-

ferred to as Deecee.

Lockhart was a slender, young fellow, who sat his double-cinched saddle proudly. He was not too slight, but just the right build for an expert horsebreaker. Crisp chestnut hair showed from beneath the curved brim of his brown Stetson. He was tanned from his life in the open, and his features were even and pleasing. He sported a small, carefully clipped mustache and his hazel eyes were wide-set and steady. His garb was the usual leather shirt, chaps and spurred boots.

He was no ordinary cowhand but had worked up a reputation as being a flash rider. He could perform marvelous feats in handling and riding the most vicious unbroken horses. Apparently he sat loosely in the saddle, yet he could not be jarred out of it by the most violent gyrations of a bronco. He limped a bit from an injury sustained to his left leg in an accident some years before. No matter how good the horse-breaker might be it was still a dangerous calling, and none escaped without a broken bone now and then.

The long leather flaps of his tapped stirrups softly rustled and Tuffy's hoof clacked against a round stone, sending it rolling down the sandy slope until it brought up short against a root. A massive outcropping of limestone jutted from the earth here, showing of what the hills were composed. This rough stretch blocked the way, so Lockhart turned at a slant down the hill.

The golden sun was hot in a blue sky shot by swift-running puffs of white clouds. There was a breeze at ground level but in the upper reaches a faster, more restless current hurried them on. As Lockhart reached a point from which he could see the partially wooded country past the toe of the limestone formation he sighted two men riding down there. They were intent on their job as they hazed a dozen galloping mustangs ahead of them.

This range belonged to Cargill and was shared by a neighbor rancher, Steve Labry. Lockhart knew at a glance that the horsemen did not belong to either outfit. They might be legitimate operators but on the other hand suspicion mounted in the Deecee rider's mind. Like everything else the price of horses had gone up since the railroad had reached Austin. Cargill had taken on Lockhart for the express purpose of cashing in on his mustangs which were running in these hills. Both work animals and saddle stock were in real demand.

Lockhart therefore did not call out to them, but swerved so that he could approach them from behind a grove of oaks near the base of the butte. The busy pair, he saw then, had run the mustangs into a concealed corral which Lockhart himself had built for just such a purpose! They had cut into the band of animals he had been trailing.

He was almost upon them, but they were not yet aware of his presence. One of them had jumped down to close the gate with hidden pole bars, penning the nervous creatures against the rock wall. Most of them were not unused to man, but were range stock which had been turned out for a time.

CHAPTER II

Attack on the Deecee

LOCKHART touched his six-shooter, making sure it was ready and loose in the sheath.

One fellow who had been hazing the stolen mustangs, he noticed, wore brown, scratched leather and a flat-brimmed hat strapped to his bullet head. The other was a Mexican in steeple sombrero and tight-fitting pants. Both were heavily armed and of tough aspect.

Tuffy was a well-trained mount. He stood quiet at Lockhart's signal.

"Afternoon, boys," sang out the bronc buster.

The Mexican, who was shutting the gate, started and whirled, his brown face contorting. The other horse thief whipped around in his saddle.

"What yuh doin' with them Deecee hosses?" demanded Ace.

They consulted each other with swift glances.

"Who wants to know?" growled the man in leather, obviously a Texan.

Without warning he went for his Colt, at the same time kicking his spotted geld-

ing into motion with a raking spur.

The Mexican launched himself through the air and hit leather, low over his mount's mane. Lockhart got off the first shot and knew he had made a hit, for the Texan jerked violently and yelped with pain, his bullets flying wild past Lockhart.

The horse thieves made a run for it around the limestone outcropping, with young Lockhart after them. His quarry madly galloped into the woods as he trailed them, pistol up, ready for a snap shot at the thieves who had been surprised at work.

Lockhart kept after them through the woods but as he emerged from the trees onto an open, rolling area he sighted a half-dozen more strangers of the same cut. They were coming to join the fleeing pair with whom Lockhart had tangled and it was plain they were all members of the same bunch.

Lockhart pulled Tuffy up as the Mexican and his wounded companion shrieked and pointed back at their pursuer. Most of the other men pulled carbines from saddle sockets, cocked them and raised them, promptly opening fire on the bronc buster. He heard the dangerous singing of their lead.

"Tie yore hat to the saddle and ride!" Lockhart advised himself as he hastily pivoted Tuffy and streaked back the way he had come.

He wasted a couple of slugs on the bunch chasing him, then pouched his Colt and settled down to it.

They ran him down Walnut Creek trail for about three miles, until they were sure that they could not overtake him, and that he was too skilled a horseman to be tricked into a spill. He had gained on them steadily, and was out of anything like easy range, even for a rifle.

The sun was setting behind the western mountains as Ace Lockhart dropped from his horse at the Deecee. It was built on a high point over Walnut Creek, taking into account the seasonal floods expected from year to year. Native stone and timber had been used in construction of the roomy, one-storied ranchhouse and the long, flat-roofed bunkhouse. There were corrals and a barn and the usual smaller sheds and equipment for conducting such a business as Cargill's.

Hatfield waved at the buckskin-clad men (CHAP. V)

The Deecee owned cattle, but beef was secondary to mustangs here.

A few cowboys lounged about, waiting for the dinner bell with the avid anticipation of young fellows whose vigorous calling keeps them outdoors and in the pink of condition.

Dillard Cargill swung to Lockhart as his flash rider limped up. Cargill had a broad face fringed by a dark beard and illuminated by intensely blue eyes. Burly shoulders filled out his flannel shirt while whipcord breeches tucked into runover half-boots covered sturdy legs.

He was an upright, honest man, so it was but natural that he never hesitated to express in an exceptionally loud voice on such subjects as he held positive opinions.

Lockhart glimpsed Claire through an open kitchen window. She was busy helping prepare the evening meal. In her plain gingham dress, and with her light hair carelessly caught up on her head, she was as beautiful to him as if she had worn satin. Her violet eyes smiled at the bronc buster as she gave him a quick wave.

LOCKHART promptly reported to his employer what he had come upon in the hills northwest of the ranch.

"They're drivin' off yore horses, suh, Looks like a big band of thieves."

Sulphurous exclamations proved Cargill's angry reaction.

"Why, the yampin' fools, they got lots of gall! Prices are sky-high for work hosses and oxen, with so many settlers comin' on the new railroad, and the buildin' boom in the city. I heard that that hoss thief, Dogface Lucas, has been seen in these parts, though."

"Could be his band, Mr. Cargill. He's the worst hoss thief in Texas."

Claire leaned out the window to ring the dinner bell and the cowboys disappeared inside as if by magic. "Let's put on the feedbag," suggested Cargill to Lockhart. "I can think better when I ain't starvin'."

After the meal they all sat on the front porch watching the sun go down, smoking and discussing the problem presented by the thieves. Several riders hove into sight on the road from Austin and when the visitors were closer, Cargill recognized them.

"That's Cy Isbell, that beefy hombre," he said. "He's a wholesale contractor in town. The little Mexican with him is Juan Enriquez. They call him *El Chicaro,* the Pea. That's because he's so small yuh can hardly find him, I reckon."

Isbell and Enriquez left their men and rode up to the porch. "Light and set," sang out Cargill.

The massive Isbell wore fine clothing, and a diamond shone from a hairy hand. He smiled and nodded as he came up on the veranda, trailed by the diminutive Pea.

"Good evening, Cargill." Isbell's manner was assured. "I came out to tell you Ban Gregory is dead. His body was found half a mile down the Colorado from Austin."

Cargill jumped up, swearing. "Hair in the butter! Everything happens at once. Young Lockhart, here, our bronc buster, got chased by a bunch of hoss thieves today. They been helpin' themselves to my stock. I believe it may be Dogface Lucas and his band. I aim to complain to the Rangers about it. Who killed pore Ban?"

Isbell shook his head. "No one knows. He was shot and dumped in the river. Probably highwaymen did it. I understand you had an agreement with him to furnish him work horses and oxen. Senor Enriquez here might be willing to take them off your hands if the price is right."

Cargill blinked. "Gregory paid me top market prices. Whatever the Deecee delivers is first-grade."

Ace Lockhart quietly left his employer haggling with Isbell and *El Chicaro,* for he had seen Claire come into the parlor. He joined her and they went out a side way and strolled along the footpath bordering Walnut Creek. Toward Austin, Mount Bonnell loomed in the purpling sky as the sun dropped behind the western hills. Frogs and crickets piped in the evening and a cool breeze sprang up. The two young people were delightfully aware of the evening's beauty, but they were equally aware of each other.

When they returned to the ranchhouse Isbell and his party had gone, and Cargill was preparing to turn in. Like most

ranchers he was up with the dawn as a rule, and seldom burned the midnight oil. Lockhart lingered, and pressed Claire's hand as he said good night. He hesitated to leave her, and suddenly drew her into his arms. It was the thrill of his young lifetime when she responded to his kiss.

He seemed to be treading on air as he made his way to the bunkhouse. But he was young and healthy, and soon he was asleep, oblivious to the snores of his cowboy confreres sounding through the long building.

Lockhart did not know how long he had been asleep when abruptly he jumped awake to the crash of exploding guns, the pounding of many hoofs and the savage cries of attackers driving upon the Deecee. He hit his head on the bunk frame as he hastily seized his revolver, hanging in its holster near his hand.

"What in blue blazes is goin' on!" yelled one of the boys.

Lockhart aimed to find out. The startled cowhands responded to his swift command.

"Every man get his gun!" he shouted. "Foller me! Hustle!"

HE FLUNG the door open, but recoiled as bullets drove through, narrowly missing him. A Deecee man in the line of fire yelped as a slug slashed his arm. Lockhart had the impression of many masked riders out there in the early light of dawn.

"Keep back, boys!" he warned. He leaped to a small window from which he could see the ranchhouse.

Gunshots and howls rose as more of the raiders threw themselves from their saddles to charge the kitchen entry. Cargill's mighty voice rose over the din:

"Hold, or I'll fire!"

Then angry Colts popped in a shattering volley. Cursing attackers reeled, but rallied and pushed in.

Lockhart knew the Deecee waddies must act swiftly and unerringly or Cargill would be overwhelmed.

"We got to rush 'em," fellers!" he shouted. "If we don't, they'll down the boss! Who's got a shotgun?"

There were two loaded ones in the bunkhouse rack. Lockhart snatched one, racing to the single door. He kept to one side of it, thrust the weapon out and pulled both triggers, spraying buck in a wide arc. Mustangs screeched and masked marauders cried out. Bucking violently, many of the animals required the full attention of their riders.

Lockhart seized these few breaths while confusion reigned to make his sally. He whirled from the bunkhouse, Colt flaming. The Deecee punchers, loyal to their friend and employer, were right at Lockhart's heels. The cowboys drove back the horsemen and turned the corner, following the bronc buster as he pitched into the bunch around the kitchen, hitting them with all he had.

Lead shrieked in the night air as the Deecee fought a savage unknown foe.

CHAPTER III

Home Base

CAPTAIN WILLIAM McDOWELL, Chief of the Texas Rangers, for all of his hoary age, glared from one of his office windows at the fair capital of the Lone Star State. It was a lovely sight, with the bright sun streaming in the windows, shining on the winding, blue river and kissing the Colorado range beyond.

The city nestled in wide terraces and over low hills. Higher sections stretched northwest along the Colorado which curved through a deep, scarred bed around Austin.

Business in the new city was booming. The railroad had been completed and settlers were pouring in. Homes and commercial structures were being erected in unprecedented numbers. The legislature was in session and in the streets and byways Solons and businessmen rubbed elbows with cowboys and wild hunters off the plains.

A mocking bird trilled from a massive live oak in the velvet-green lawn but it was unheeded by McDowell, whose scowl remained sour. Nature's distractions could not soothe him. Had a nail been clenched between what was left of his teeth McDowell could have bitten it in twain.

"Why, they're operatin' right on home

base!" he snarled, swinging to pace the floor with tigerish stride. "The Governor will have me on the carpet for this if it goes much farther, and rightly so. They'll say I'm gettin' too old for the job."

It took a man to hold that job. Strength of character, experience and other qualities were required. He was well aware that he must show results or step down in favor of somebody who could. So far he had managed to stay out ahead, although he often felt Old Man Time's searing breath on the back of his tough, weathered neck. He was fiercely proud of his reputation, acquired as a Ranger in the field and later as a captain. But beyond any personal consideration he respected decent people. It infuriated him to see them put upon by outlaws of any type.

A tall figure appeared in the open doorway and touched the panel with a polite knuckle. The old Ranger chief turned.

"Hatfield!" he boomed. "Come in. Tell me what you think about this. They're challengin' us right in our own back yard!"

Ranger Jim Hatfield was the captain's star field investigator. He was a commanding figure of a man who stood over six feet in his spurred halfboots. His uniform was whipcord riding breeches, blue shirt, a reversed bandanna about his neck, and a big Stetson. With him, however, his weapons were the most important part of his attire, for he would have felt undressed without the crossed cartridge belts supporting his holstered Colt revolvers.

Broad of shoulder, his body tapering to narrow hips, Hatfield looked to be in the best of condition, and was. His black hair sheened with his youthful vigor and his long-lashed, gray-green eyes were clear and keen. His face was somewhat rugged, but the sternness of his features was relieved by a wide mouth, which was quick to smile. He was a bronzed giant, this man who was rated among the greatest of Rangers, liked and trusted by those who depended on his capacity to shield them from evil-doers. To that end, he had fitted himself in every way possible.

Hatfield's mastery of guns, his lightning speed in action, were acknowledged and admired, and it was admitted that his strategy and tactics were as unmatched as were his physical assets. And for these reasons, knowing that he was the best man for a job McDowell had in mind, the old Ranger had sent a hurry call for him although Hatfield had just ridden in from a long, dangerous field operation.

"Sit down," ordered McDowell, as Hatfield came into the room with his long-legged strides. "Here, light up." He shoved tobacco and papers across the desk as the young Ranger took a chair.

"Yes suh. *Graçias.*" Hatfield's voice was soft, not the least of his assets. He began rolling a quirly.

"Somethin's goin' on right under my nose, Jim," McDowell complained, "and I can't figger it. Yuh savvy the Deecee Ranch, don't yuh? It belongs to Dillard Cargill and lies about ten miles upriver. Cargill has just come in and complained that his home was attacked last night by a passel of masked gunslingers. He believes they're hoss thieves, led by Dogface Lucas."

"Lucas?" Hatfield paused as he licked the joint of his cigarette. He was quickly alert. The Rangers had been on "Dogface's" trail, but so far nothing had come of it. "He showed himself that close, did he?"

"He shore did. Rumors have come in that he was lurkin' in the hills. Last time we almost caught up with him he run, and got away. Now I want his hide."

RANGER HATFIELD nodded. He had seen circulars describing the notorious horse thief, and in his keen mind was a fairly good picture of Lucas' appearance. If he should see this outlaw he would know him.

"Cargill's neighbor, Steve Labry, says he's losin' cattle," went on McDowell, "and that means moren' usual these days. With the boom ripsnortin', prices of work hosses, oxen and beef cattle are high as a duke's nose. And that rustlin' of Labry's beefs is just the beginnin'. If it was only Dogface Lucas we had to handle I might take some recruits and sally out after the cuss myself. But there's other things goin' on, right here in town and nearby. Ban Gregory, a city contractor, was shot recently and dumped in the river. They picked up his remains

downstream two days ago. Early this mornin' another builder named Timothy Fralee was garroted, his body tossed into a vacant lot hardly a block from the Capitol!

"They were both important hombres. When the *Statesman* comes out everybody will be stirred up and some will panic for shore, because, yuh savvy how newspapers play with such yarns. Used to be a sayin' before we run the Indians

Cyrus Isbell, Enriquez and Vesper

out of this section: 'Yuh're shore to find a congressman in his boardin' house after sundown!' It may hold again if we don't show quick results and arrest the killers. The big thing is it hurts Austin and the state. And my hide will be hung on the fence to dry!"

Hatfield made few comments, but he recognized the gravity of the situation. When he had mentally catalogued all the information at McDowell's disposal, the tall young Ranger shook hands with his chief and strode out to the sunny yard. Here waited his war horse, Goldy—a powerful sorrel of a golden hue with a long, rich mane and tail of a lighter hue. Goldy's speed and strength were such that he could carry the man who was his friend over long miles without faltering, and Hatfield's training had brought the sorrel to the highest point of intelligence.

Where Hatfield was mounted a carbine rode in a boot under his leg. He had supplies for camping out in his saddlebags o- rolled in the slicker at his cantle. Ready to leave, he swung to wave goodby as he moved away from headquarters, a magnificent rider on a magnificent horse.

He wheeled Goldy then and rode up Congress Avenue, which was teeming with life. In fact all Austin hummed with activity, and the crowds made up a colorful pageant. Businessmen in sober garb, hunters in buckskins, cowboys and stage drivers in their fancy raiment, flowed by him in the streets. Urchins played in the gutters. Teams and saddle animals passed, raising dust under clicking hoofs or metal-rimmed wheels.

Hatfield swung east on a side street and passed some lots where work horses and oxen, dragging metal scoops guided by expert hands, were readying excavations for new homes or office buildings. At other spots carpenter hammers rang out as further stages in the process were carried out. The Ranger was proud of his city as he mused that now the Houston & Texas Central linked the capital with the Gulf. Here, in her amphitheater on the Colorado, Austin had always been the heart of Texas, from the time the Lone Star empire had functioned as an independent nation under Houston, Burnet, Lamar and Jones.

Hatfield rode on and finally dropped rein in the yard of a small cottage. Going up on the porch, he rapped on the door. A beautiful girl with golden glints in her hair and an exquisite figure set off by a blue dress, answered his knock. She smiled up at him with amber eyes.

"Jim!" she exclaimed. "How nice to see you! Come in."

The girl, Anita Robertson, was a schoolteacher in Austin. Ever since the Ranger had aided her and her young brother, "Buck," when enemies had set upon them on the Brazos, the Robertsons and Hatfield had been firm friends.

"Thanks, ma'am," the Ranger said as he bent his head to enter the doorway. "Is Buck here?"

"Yes, he's in the stable. I'll call him. Have a seat."

Anita went to call her brother, and in a moment Buck came running in, a tall, lean youth of sixteen with a freckled face, uptilted nose, and his light hair bleached a tow color by the Texas sun. He wore blue levis, a gray shirt, and a red bandanna at his throat.

BUCK'S brown eyes danced and his exuberant caperings shook the house.

"Ranger!" he yelled, with a shrill war whoop of sheer joy. "We're ridin'!"

"Please, Buck," admonished Anita. "You'll bring down the roof!" But she smiled at his happiness.

Hatfield grinned at his young friend. Whenever he could he took Buck along on his forays against the enemies of Lone Star law. Buck was eagerly learning the ropes, for some day he hoped to join the Rangers. These trips with Hatfield were the best possible education for a young fellow who was reckless by nature, and needed the example and guidance of a strong mentor. Anita long ago had realized this and willingly allowed her brother to travel with his tall comrade, even though it meant anxiety for her while they were gone.

Her only insistence was that they eat a warm meal before starting out and prepared it herself, for since it was Saturday she did not have to be in school. When they had finished, she stood on the veranda to wave to them as they hit for the river road. Buck was riding Old Heart 7, his chunky gray mustang on which was the fine saddle Hatfield had given him. As light as he was, Buck could ride like a jockey, his sister thought. He carried a light carbine and a hunting knife, and knew how to use both.

As they rode away from the cottage Hatfield gave Buck an idea of what they were after.

"Hoss thieves, huh?" exclaimed the boy. "Where to first, Jim, the Deecee?"

"That's it," the Ranger nodded. "I want to see Dillard Cargill and prob'ly Steve Labry. Dogface Lucas has been gettin' in his licks with them. He raided Cargill's and done a lot of damage, though the ranch managed to beat 'em off."

When they had left the town behind, on the road northwest along the Colorado, Mount Bonnell bulked before them, her slopes clad in cedar and laurel as she dominated the river. A breath-taking panorama of Austin and the surrounding country could be seen from her summit.

"We learned a song about that mountain in school," remarked Buck.

"Let's have it," said Hatfield, and Buck opened his mouth and let the words roll out.

> Oh, Mount Bonnell,
> Hold, hold the spell
> You wrought that glowin' even;
> It seems to me we ne'er can be
> Again so nigh to heaven.

"Bueno!" applauded Hatfield. "That's mighty fine singin', Buck. And plumb true."

They rode on, along the highway that skirted Bonnell on the north. West of the mountain Walnut Creek joined the Colorado and the range began, hills and valleys rolling on in a grand sweep.

After more than an hour of riding in the hot sun they turned off the dirt road to rest the horses and stretch. They were not far from Cargill's ranch now, and soon a plume of smoke in the sky should mark the ranchhouse chimney.

Rises, covered by cedar, laurel and scrub woods intervened between them and the Deecee, however, and they did not see the smoke. However, as they resumed the journey they did see a small band of mustangs running on a ridge to the north. The mares and colts following a big gray stallion made a pretty sight as they galloped off with flying manes and tails. These would be practically wild creatures, for stallions and mares caused so much trouble when free that many ranchers would shoot down a stallion on sight. Geldings were used as a rule for riding and working purposes, and breeding was controlled.

"Wonder what spooked 'em?" Hatfield said to Buck. "It ain't us. They couldn't have scented or spotted us yet."

The wind was not from the right direction for that, and the way the horses were headed told Hatfield that he and Buck had not alarmed the keen-sensed mustangs.

It was second nature with the Ranger never to ignore even small warnings, but to be eternally vigilant when on duty. So now he slowed the pace and drew off the road, beneath a giant oak. He stared up the wooded slope as the horses disappeared in the tall timber.

After a time a scintillating flash caught his eye.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Looks like the sun on a polished rifle barrel, Buck."

He dismounted and took his field glasses from their black-leather case. Remaining in the shade to forestall telltale glints from the glasses he focused them and studied the area in which he had seen the flash.

"Anything?" asked Buck, after a time.

"Some swallows veered off sudden-like. I believe there's somebody up there and I'm going to see who it is before we show ourselves along that stretch of road."

Picking the route and using stands of timber and contours of rock and earth as concealment, the Ranger and Buck rode up to the ridge. Here they struck a narrow, winding trail through the woods and followed it, moving slowly and staying on guard.

"Look!" said Buck suddenly, pointing through a vista to the road below.

A couple of men were driving several mustangs along the dirt road, toward the Deecee.

Hatfield pulled up and studied them with his binoculars.

"That bulky hombre is Dillard Cargill or I'll eat my Stetson," he told the boy.

Cargill—unsuspicious!

And up on the ridge where the road curved in under the heights was someone with a rifle!

CHAPTER IV

Dogface Lucas

HATFIELD needed no further warning. He was not far now from the point where he had noted the sun reflection. Dismounting again he dropped rein, waving for Buck to dismount also. Drawing a Colt and pulling the hammer spur back under his thumb, he glided on, with Buck after him, leaving their horses in the trail.

Cluck-cluck! No human throat had made that sound. It was a heavy weapon being cocked and it drew the Ranger to a thicket at the edge of the bluff. He glimpsed wide-spread, long, leather-clad legs sticking from under a bush, saw the spurred, black-booted feet.

Seeing that position, anybody familiar with shooting could guess that the owner of the legs was drawing a bead on a target beyond.

He might squeeze trigger at any instant. And Dillard Cargill could be the victim!

"Hey there!" called the Ranger in a sharp voice. He fired, throwing a slug into the earth a few inches from one of the feet.

The man in the thicket had been intent on his task. The challenge and the roar of the Colt sent him surging up in a mad scramble. His finger contracted on the trigger, with his convulsive alarm, and the powerful, long-range rifle he gripped went off into the air with a reverberating bellow.

The drygulcher whirled on Hatfield and Buck. He was still half squatting, and his Stetson had been brushed off as he had jerked his head up in the bushes. He was a big, muscular man with a squarish head covered with matted, clay-colored hair. Pale eyes flamed in a bronzed face with a flat, broken nose and a scarred upper lip which permanently bared the man's front teeth. This gave his features a bulldog cast. It had been said that Lucas once had been kicked by a mule which explained his peculiar expression.

"Dogface Lucas!" yelled Hatfield.

The horsethief had tossed aside his rifle, a single-shot piece, and was digging for his Colt which was holstered at a bunched hip. He was glaring at Hatfield, intent only on the tall officer whose body shielded Buck.

"Reach!" warned Hatfield.

But Lucas believed he could make it. Hatfield had to shoot. Dogface lost the race, shuddered, and pitched forward to grovel in the sandy dirt.

"Look out!" shrieked Buck, turning his light carbine. "Here come more of 'em!"

Hatfield whipped around and spied four

more rough customers speeding through the woods.

Quickly he pushed Buck behind the gnarled trunk of an old cedar. He would not expose his young comrade to such dangerous fire at close quarters, and anyway he had to prevent Buck from being marked by the enemy.

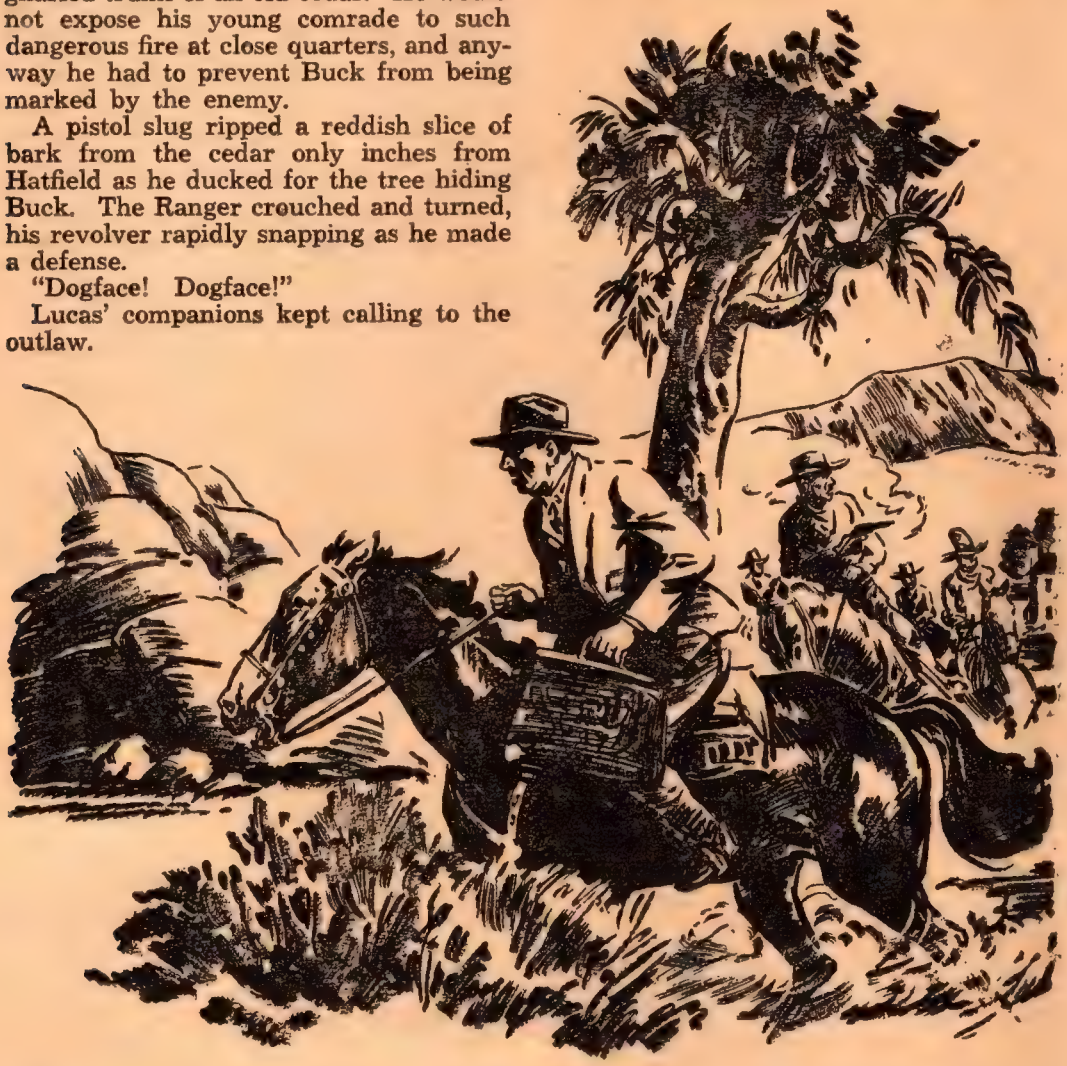
A pistol slug ripped a reddish slice of bark from the cedar only inches from Hatfield as he ducked for the tree hiding Buck. The Ranger crouched and turned, his revolver rapidly snapping as he made a defense.

"Dogface! Dogface!"

Lucas' companions kept calling to the outlaw.

the hosses close as yuh can without showin'."

One of his first lessons to Buck was to



The leading outlaw who was shooting at the ranger as he raced on, was violently whipped around as a bullet cut his shoulder. He sank to his knees, but rose yelping and made off. The others, confronted by the guns of two determined men hidden behind the cedar, slowed and then broke for it, hopping for concealment in the bushes. But the Ranger quickly noted the spots into which they had dived.

"Buck!" he ordered. "Creep back, stay down on yore belt buckle, savvy? Fetch

obey orders without question, so the youth flattened out and squirmed off with the sinuous movements of a serpent. The cedar protected him until he reached a laurel clump.

Hatfield tried a bush where he had last spied an enemy. His spaced lead crisply zipped through the leaves—and brought results. An outlaw bobbed up and ran to the rear bent over for better cover. The wounded man was out of sight down the ridge, yelling for help at the top of his voice.

"Hustle, boys! Come on! They shot Dogface!"

THE Ranger flushed another horse thief from the right side of the trail. Evidently the fourth and last had been nearby for two men hastily dashed down the ridge.

"I got a few minutes now, I reckon," thought Hatfield.

He went flitting toward the unmoving Lucas and drew no further fire. The echoes of the explosions had died. The four outlaws who had been near Lucas on the ridge were in full retreat, but were calling loudly for reinforcements. And such might soon appear, for Hatfield knew that Dogface commanded a large crew.

The Ranger was determined to hold his prisoner, if possible. It was a bit of luck that he had caught up with Lucas, yet it had taken acumen, special skill and experience to do it. Not only that, but he would have to fight to turn the break to real account. Still, he was determined to do it, and incisive, unerring action in an emergency had helped raise Ranger Jim Hatfield to the peak of his profession.

He found that Dogface Lucas had only been creased, as he had thought. Hatfield had aimed for that, wanting to capture the horse thief alive if it could be done. The jagged, bleeding furrow in the scalp could be seen through Lucas' clay-colored hair. He was breathing stertorously and was stunned, but not hurt much.

The Ranger seized the thick wrists and pulled Dogface up by his long arms. Stooping, he pushed a shoulder under the belted waist and rose so that the limp outlaw broke in the middle, head hanging down behind, legs held by Hatfield's strong grip.

"You shore been eatin' well lately," muttered the Ranger as he staggered beneath the man's weight.

He glanced back to see if Dogface's men had decided to come to their leader's aid, but no shots came at him. He could hear distant calls, however, as the outlaws he had routed signaled their companions. There was no time to hunt for Lucas' mount before Buck appeared on the winding ridge trail, leading Goldy and riding Old Heart 7.

On the sorrel, Hatfield whirled after Isbell (CHAP. XX)

"We'll sling the cuss over yore hoss, Buck," said the Ranger. "Goldy will have to tote double. Huh! Lucas is as heavy as lead. Give me a hand tyin' him."

Buck jumped down, shaking out a lasso at Hatfield deposited Dogface over the chunky gray's saddle. A few skillful loops secured Lucas and they mounted the powerful sorrel and started off, cut-

ting down toward the dirt road. Cargill had ridden on out of sight toward his home.

If he and the man who had been with him had heard the shooting they must have concluded it was dangerous to remain out in the open.

And naturally Cargill must be jumpy after what had occurred at his ranch and would be on the lookout for trouble from any direction.

As they passed the giant oak where they had first sighted the running stallion and his harem, the telltale which had sent the Ranger to the right, Hatfield glanced back. He saw long lines of riders coming down the wooded slope, hot on their trail.

"We'll never make it like this, Buck!" he shouted. For he knew that for all the strength and stamina of the golden sorrel he could not show his speed with such extra weight on him. Hatfield hated to give up Dogface Lucas, but it would mean fighting impossible, overwhelming odds once the outlaws caught up with them.

A turn in the road put them temporarily out of sight of the ravening foe, pushing through in order to rescue their chief.

"Here's the best thing, Buck," the Ranger said hastily. "You duck into the tall timber and hide. Wait till yuh're shore they've passed, then make for the Deecee. It ain't far. I'll meet yuh there soon as I can."

"All right, Jim. I hate to leave yuh, though." Buck jumped down. With a wave of his hand and, gripping his light rifle, he disappeared into the woods on the far side of the road.

His burden lightened, Goldy could pick up speed and Old Heart 7 had to stretch his gray legs as he was jerked along by the lead-rope fastened through his bit rings. Hatfield kept looking over his shoulder at the stretch of highway bordering the trees into which Buck had skipped.

He wanted to make certain that none of the killers had seen the youth.

A HORSE thief in a high-peaked sombrero trimmed with rows of white pearl buttons, and wearing the short, graceful jacket of a *vaquero* and velvet pants under his leather chaps, came tearing around the bend. He sighted the Ranger leading the gray with Lucas slung over the saddle, and set up a high-pitched, excited baying. Two more outlaws in leather and Stetsons hove into view. The Mexican pointed at Hatfield and signaled on the bunch of toughs who were crowded up.

The entire length of road was crowded with pegging riders.

Apparently they had not seen Buck desert the parade for none of them stopped. Instead, all of them surged after the Ranger. He spoke to Goldy who again picked up the pace. The sorrel had a good start and ought to be able to stay ahead barring one or two exceptional animals in the enemy ranks. Austin was not many miles off and as he neared town the Ranger thought he might run on somebody who would help him against the thieves.

If worst came to worst he could always drop the lead-rope and Goldy would carry him to safety.

The *vaquero* was riding a long-limbed, sleek black gelding which streaked along with apparently effortless speed, slowly closing the gap between the Mexican and the Ranger.

HATFIELD checked every so often as the Mexican's horse brought him within easy Colt range.

Firing from a jolting saddle was usually a matter of luck, although some highly trained men could average a fair number of hits.

The Ranger held his lead. The eager *vaquero* raised a pearl-handled revolver and began trying for the officer. A bullet whirled within a few feet of Hatfield. Turning, the Ranger took aim, and a breath after he raised his thumb off the hammer of his Colt the fancy sombrero flew right off the Mexican's black-haired head.

The warning was enough. The *vaquero* veered and slowed the black. He allowed several of his companions to overtake him, convinced by Hatfield's exhibition of marksmanship that retreat was the better part of valor.

Half a mile on, when the Ranger hit a second outlaw who came pounding too near, that was final proof to the horse thieves that they must rush up in a bunch or die one by one.

CHAPTER V

Calaboose

THE chase settled down to a dogged run, with more than thirty horse thieves honing for the tall officer's blood. They fired carbines and revolvers and howled challenges at him but he kept going, the lead-rope looped around his saddle-horn, pistol in one hand as he guided the golden gelding.

The long swing around Mount Bonnell's stubby bastions had brought him within sight of Austin streets when three men in fringed buckskin appeared on the road, coming from town. They looked like hunters and each carried a cased, heavy rifle as well as pistols and knives.

They slowed their horses, growing wary at what they saw. Hatfield waved at them, pointing back at the outlaws.

"I'm a law officer, gents," he sang out as he neared them. "I got a hoss thief prisoner I'm takin' in and those are his pards back there, tryin' to rescue him! Better watch yore own hides! They're tough."

"We'll give yuh a hand," growled one of them, his hand going to his revolver.

All three of them turned and joined Hatfield, and he certainly welcomed their assistance. Lucas' band realized now that they had failed, that they could not snatch back their leader. They were getting too close to the city for a running fight. Half of them fell back, while the rest trailed for only a short distance more before swinging their mounts to retreat.

A ranch wagon loomed into view, coming from the center of town. Various horsemen were on the highway along the river now, cowboys on their way to Austin or leaving the city. With all this Hatfield could now take it easy, catch his breath and give Goldy and Old Heart 7 a breather.

The hunters pushed closer to stare curiously at the limp captive.

"Ugly lookin' cuss, ain't he?" remarked one.

"Shore is, and as bad as he looks," declared Hatfield. "I'm obliged for yore help, boys."

"Well, yuh didn't need much, at that!" another assured him, grinning.

They went on their way and he headed for the center of town, attracting stares and many turned heads as he took his prisoner through the streets to the lock-up. As he dismounted and began unfastening Lucas he found that the bandit had regained his senses. Dogface's baleful eyes glared at him and the thief's big yellow teeth bared in that perpetual snarl, were as menacing as those of a caged wild beast.

"Yuh'll eat lead for this," he threatened hoarsely. "I'll kill yuh if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Dry up, Dogface," replied the Ranger pleasantly. "Yuh can boil over in yore cell."

"Yuh can't hold me," the outlaw defied. "I'll show yuh."

Hatfield had confiscated the man's weapons and he was still groggy, so he made no attempt to break away from the alert officer. Inside the city station a police sergeant eyed the crestfallen captive.

"So that's Dogface Lucas, huh! A real good catch, Ranger."

The prisoner was booked, then led off to a cell and locked up. Hatfield, with his man safely behind bars, rode to headquarters and reported the capture to McDowell.

"Great work!" cried the old captain. "Yuh're movin' fast, son!"

Leaving headquarters, the Ranger groomed Goldy, rested, and watered his mount. The afternoon was well along when he ate his dinner. He was waiting for dark to fall before starting again for Dillard Cargill's, for undoubtedly Lucas' followers would be lurking outside of town, watching for the tall man on the golden sorrel.

If they were waiting, however, he managed to get by them unseen, for he was not even challenged until he reached the Deecee. There a sharp order came from the black shadow of an oak growing at the head of the lane leading to the ranch-house.

"Pull up there!"

Hatfield stopped.

"I want to see Mr. Cargill. Is Buck Robertson here?"

"Oh, yeah." The man who had chal-

lenged the Ranger came closer and squinted at him. "Yuh're Buck's pard, I s'pose. He made it here and told us how yuh'd captured Dogface Lucas. Ride on up to the house and light and set."

LAMPS illuminated the Deecee windows. It was near bedtime and except for the sentries which Cargill evidently had out, the ranchers were making ready to turn in. As Hatfield rode up a slender but strong figure limped from the shadow and looked up at the Ranger, a double-barreled shotgun gripped in one hand.

"I'm Ace Lockhart," he said. "I'm ridin' for Mr. Cargill." The Ranger thought the rider had a pleasant voice.

"Glad to savvy yuh," he said as he dismounted and dropped rein.

He walked beside Lockhart to the open front door where he could see his face. His features, too, were pleasant. He was young and he wore a small, clipped mustache. His hazel eyes were set wide in a bronzed face, and the hair that could be seen from under his brown hat was a crisp chestnut.

Lockhart was as curious about the visitor, and quickly appraised him in the light. Apparently he liked what he saw.

"Boss!" he called. "Here's Buck's *amigo*. I better get back on the stand."

He faded off as the Ranger entered the ranchhouse. Dillard Cargill rose from a chair by the round center table and Buck bounded up from a seat in front of the stone fireplace where he had been reading a paper.

"Welcome, suh," boomed Cargill, thrusting out his blunt hand.

Buck had done a fine job as ambassador for there was no reserve in the burly rancher's manner. A broad smile wreathed his lips that showed beneath the dark beard fringing his face.

"I told 'em yuh'd make it, Jim," cried Buck.

Hatfield winked at his comrade and shook hands with Cargill. "I guess Buck has played me up, suh," he said deprecatingly. "I reckon he told yuh all about how we run on Dogface Lucas as he tried to drygulch yuh earlier today. I got him locked up in Austin."

"I aimed to thank yuh for savin' my hide," said Cargill.

"Forget that for now," said Hatfield. "I need to have a talk with yuh. Cap'n McDowell had yore complaint. My handle is Hatfield, as I reckon Buck told yuh. Didn't mean to make such a hooraw around here, because I like to start in quiet-like on an investigation. But since I had to take Lucas in we'll have to appear against him when he comes up before the judge on Monday."

"*Bueno*," said Cargill. "I'm with yuh."

A light-haired girl with lovely violet eyes stood just inside the doorway with her arm about an older woman. They smiled at the guest as the rancher said: "My wife, suh, and my daughter Claire. That's Dill Junior in the corner, if yuh can catch him."

The tow-haired boy of about nine he indicated was a shy button. When Hatfield grinned at him he turned and ran down the hall. Soon the women retired and the Ranger sat down to talk and smoke with his host.

But Cargill could add little to what Hatfield already knew, except to describe the night attack in greater detail. He was sure it had been engineered by Dogface Lucas and his horse thieves, although during the raid the hard-pressed defenders had been unable to distinguish the faces of their masked assailants.

"Lockhart was able to fetch the boys over to help me in the nick," said Cargill. "It was hair in the butter till we managed to drive 'em off. Now I'm keepin' guards out day and night. They won't s'prise me again."

"I savvy why they're stealin' yore stock," Hatfield commented, "for prices are sky-high. But it ain't clear why Dogface is so all-fired bent on killin' you, Cargill? Has he got anything special against yuh?"

"Not that I know about. Why, I never saw the cuss before he started in on me." Cargill was indignant.

After a little more talk and probing on the Ranger's part he learned that Cargill had been a friend and business connection of Gregory, the contractor, who had been found murdered. The rancher also volunteered the information that Juan Enriquez had come to the ranch with Cyrus Isbell and offered to buy the work horses, oxen and beef cattle with which Cargill had meant to supply Greg-

ory. But as yet there was no deal, since they were not agreed on the price to be paid.

Hatfield mentioned Steve Labry, Cargill's neighbor, who was troubled with rustlers.

"Yes, he's been losin' cattle," said Cargill.

"Tomorrer's Sunday," the Ranger said thoughtfully, "and court won't sit. I'll have a look-see at yore range and we'll ride around Labry's way and talk to him."

THEY did not talk for long, because Cargill had been up since dawn and was weary. He invited Hatfield to spend the night and the Ranger thanked him. After unsaddling Goldy and turning the sorrel into a grassy corral, the officer found a spare bed in the bunkhouse and went promptly to sleep.

The next day, after riding around the Deecee Ranch, Cargill guided Hatfield to the ranch of Steve Labry, which lay to the north of the Deecee.

The Ranger found Labry to be a large-boned man with black hair and a Gallic cast of features. His parents had come from France to the New World, but Steve had been raised in Texas and spoke the cowman's language. His Square L handled cattle and he had had a good market in Austin.

Labry talked willingly of his troubles. But he had less information than Cargill. Hatfield soon had all there was, and suggested to Cargill that they had best be moving on.

They were wary as they moved across the rolling range, for they were aware enemies might be watching, ready to shoot. The Ranger studied the land with its rock formations. Now and then they would sight a bunch of cattle up a draw or a band of horses in a meadow, swinging their tails against flies.

Golden sunlight flooded the earth and the air was balmy. Walnut Creek purled in its bed between uneven rows of green growth. In the southeast distance Mount Bonnell thrust its crest toward an azure sky, and beyond it was Austin. The world was at peace, and it was hard to comprehend that death might be anywhere at hand.

It was dinnertime when they got back to the Deecee. The Cargill women were excellent cooks and Hatfield enjoyed the hearty meal they served. He became better acquainted with the flash rider, Asa Lockhart as the hours went on and was much interested when in the late afternoon, some of the cowboys egged on one of their number to make a bet with the bronc buster. When pressed and challenged Lockhart smiled good-naturedly.

"All right," he agreed. "Fetch out Nightmare if yuh want."

The men hurried to a rear corral. A whistling noose settled over the bullet head of a vicious outlaw black mustang. Nightmare began plunging and snorting, fighting so savagely that other ropes had to be brought into play to throw him down so he could be saddled and a hackamore slipped over his head. He tried to bite and strike with his forefeet.

When all was ready Lockhart mounted, taut ropes holding the quivering man-killer. Under each of the bronc buster's feet a silver half-dollar was placed, then

[*Turn page*]

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Nightmare was freed.

Lockhart seemed to sit loosely in the saddle but as the bucker warmed up the beast's wildest plunges could not unseat him—and the coins did not fall out.

"Stay with him, Ace!" shouted one excited hand after another.

Laughs and humorous remarks flew around the intrigued circle. Everybody enjoyed the show, for Nightmare's antics were amazing. His back arched, his ears back, he would snap his head down, then squeal savagely, hopping about in jarring, stiff-legged bounds. He plunged for a time, bucking as he ran. When this failed to get rid of the man on his back, Nightmare brought first one shoulder and then the other almost to the ground.

"He's the best sunfisher I ever see!" chuckled a cowboy. "Hey, Ace! Roll me a quirly!"

Nightmare finished with a high jump, changing ends while in the air. But his flanks were heaving and he had exhausted his bag of tricks. Suddenly he began running around the fence in circles.

The half-dollars were still under Lockhart's feet. He had won the small bet.

CHAPTER VI

Woman Against Woman

IN THE morning Hatfield, Cargill and Buck, with six Deecee riders as an armed escort, started for Austin. They were on the watch as they hit the road but the ten-mile trip passed without incident. They rode to the calaboose in which the Ranger had left Dogface Lucas.

Captain Bill McDowell had arrived a few minutes before them and had gone inside. As Hatfield started through the door with Cargill, the captain came steaming out, his face so scarlet and puffed with rage that it seemed he would burst.

"What's wrong, suh?" inquired the Ranger.

"They turned Dogface Lucas loose on bail yesterday, that's what!" howled McDowell. "I'll raise tarnation blazes about this!"

The opposition had stolen a march on them all right, and only now they were learning that an attorney with a writ of habeas corpus had induced a magistrate to hold a special hearing. No accusers had been present, so the bond had been set at a low figure.

"Who put up the money, suh?" asked Hatfield.

"A woman named Teresa Gasca, through this Mexican attorney Morales. It smells plumb fishy!" McDowell was fit to be tied.

"Somebody's out to perfect Dogface Lucas, that's a cinch, Cap'n," Hatfield said tightly. "Like we figgered, there's lots more to it than thieves runnin' off hosses and cattle."

Men had died in Austin and the surrounding range was being raided. Cargill and Labry were in real peril, and from some hidden enemy rather than ordinary rustlers. Both Hatfield and McDowell sensed the power of that man or combine who dared challenge the Rangers on their own doorstep.

Hatfield returned to headquarters with McDowell where they went into a session to consider ways and means. When it was over, Hatfield left his fuming chief, remounted Goldy, and rode through the town, headed for Anita Robinson's cottage. A woman was involved in the sinister plot that was being built up, whatever it was—the Teresa Gasca who had put up bail for Dogface—and Hatfield knew he would be at a disadvantage operating against a woman. He had an idea that Anita might be able to help him discover the connection between Teresa and the criminals he wanted to unearth.

Night had come now, and the Texas capital was a turbulent city. Keno and poker palaces, saloons and honkytonks were doing a thriving business, with little interference from the police.

During the day people hurried about their tasks, blind to everything save their own affairs, with the usual carelessness of busy folk. Law and order enforcement was left to others. Unless personally set upon, the Texans avoided mixing in feuds.

The *Statesman* was being sold at stands and by small boys shouting the news. The Ranger bought a copy and glanced over the lurid story playing up the killings of Ban Gregory and Tim Fra-

lee, the man who had been garroted. Hatfield saw that many others also were engrossed in reading the newspaper.

Buck had gone home earlier, and when Hatfield arrived at the cottage he found that Anita had already sent her tired young brother to bed. But she welcomed the tall officer and listened carefully as he told her what had occurred.

"I'll be delighted to help," she promised. "Anything I can do."

"I knew yuh would, ma'am," Hatfield said, relieved. "See can yuh find out who sent this Teresa Gasca to Morales with the bail money for Lucas. If we knew that it might start us on the right trail."

When Jim Hatfield left Anita he went at once to a large oasis near the Mexican quarter in the southeast section of the city. As yet he was only blindly groping for a lead, and it seemed useless. About midnight he decided to give it up for the night and turn in. Leaving the crowded bar, he started across the sidewalk to where Goldy waited with reins over the hitchrail.

SUDDENLY his Stetson flipped on his head and from the corner of his eye he caught the flaming pistol from which the bullet had come. The slug shrieked off as the tall man hurled himself around into a crouch, his Colt jumping to his slim hand. He glimpsey a dark figure not far off as a man wearing a peaked sombrero backed into the byway. The Ranger tried for him but his assailant, knowing he had missed the kill, was gone. Passersby hurriedly ducked for cover as the revolvers roared.

Hatfield ran to the dark, narrow path at the north side of the saloon. Whoever had fired on him got off another hasty one which sang well above the moving Ranger. The flash of the pistol was down almost at the turn of the path. Hatfield let go once more but the fellow in the peaked hat made the back street before the slug could reach him.

Piles of rusting tin cans and other debris which had been tossed from rear windows and doors of saloons and restaurants, as well as stables and sheds, offered plenty of hiding-places. Gun in hand, Hatfield searched for his assailant. But because of the music and raucous shouting of the celebrants he was unable to hear any slight sounds the skulking drygulcher might make.

Failing to locate his man, he gave it up and rode to headquarters to turn in for the night. . . .

Late the next afternoon he was leaning lazily against a whitewashed adobe wall up the rutted lane from a compound in the teeming Mexican Quarter. The afternoon sunlight baked the land. He was thinking about a note Buck had brought him from Anita earlier in the day, and which had read:

> I have learned that Teresa Gasca is the sister of Juan Enriquez, a dealer in oxen, work horses and other animals. He also supplies peon labor, and it is said he poses as a protector of his people but really exploits them, driving them hard and paying them low wages. He is nicknamed *El Chicaro*—the Pea—because of his diminutive size.

Hatfield had heard of Enriquez, not only by reputation, but Dillard Cargill had mentioned the fact the Pea had come with Cyrus Isbell to talk about purchasing stock from the rancher. Cargill and his men had gone home when they had discovered that Dogface Lucas had been bailed out of jail. The Ranger had cautioned Cargill to sit tight and stay on guard.

Now the Ranger himself was on the trail of *El Chicaro,* for whatever he might learn. The poor lived here in these little adobe warrens, here, two or three families sometimes sharing a single hut. Little if any attempt was made at sanitation. Goats, pigs, chickens and mangy curs rooted in piles of garbage through narrow, winding lanes, with crowds of yelling, almost naked brown-skinned children playing among them.

Warned by the attempt on his life the previous night Hatfield had approached just near enough so he could watch the compound without himself being observed by those around it. The corner of the building against which he slouched helped shield him from the lower reaches where *El Chicaro's* place stood, and he kept his hat pulled down as if to shade his eyes.

A low wall of adobe surrounded the Pea's establishment. Inside were long sheds, and corrals had been partitioned off. Oxen and beefs, horses and mules and jacks were held here for sale or hire. Mexicans in cotton garments and floppy

straw hats, bare of feet, served as wranglers and drovers. Over the entry gate a sign proclaimed:

JUAN ENRIQUEZ
Oxen—Horses—Mules

A Mexican in fine raiment—red velvet trousers trimmed at the seams with close-set pearl buttons, a silk sash and shirt had emerged from the shelter marked "Office." He carried an extra high sombrero in one hand, a quirt in the other. He was not five feet tall, and slender. Peons lounging by the headquarters swept off their hats and bowed low, as to their boss.

"El Chicaro," thought the Ranger. "The Pea. I reckon that little hombre is the one."

Hatfield was watching closely as Enriquez set his sombrero on his black-haired head. Meanwhile he gave orders in Spanish, pointing and waving his quirt to emphasize his commands. A peon brought up a saddled horse of first-class quality, a gelding whose long, shapely legs and body showed an Arab strain. The hull was a hand-carved, ornate affair with wrought silver trimmings, the type of saddle which cost a thousand dollars or more.

EL *CHICARO* pushed the butternut runner on the strap to his chin and mounted the black. He left the compound and came up the hill toward Hatfield. The Ranger eased around to the other side of the hut. Enriquez passed by, occupied in guiding the horse so he would not run down children and animals in the lanes.

"Buenas tardes, Senor El Chicaro!" a fat Mexican woman yelled shrilly, and the Pea returned a carelessly grandiose wave. Others shouted greetings, calling him "patron" and giving him similar titles of respect. Among his kind Enriquez was an important man.

Hatfield could see pride in the yellowish, sallow face and the black-button eyes as the Pea rode by.

When *El Chicaro* turned the next corner Hatfield set out to trail him, picking up the golden sorrel and carefully keeping back so Enriquez would not observe him. There was a good chance it had been one of the patron's strong-arm men who had made that stab at the Ranger the night before.

Checking up, for he must be absolutely certain of his ground, Hatfield watched the Pea dismount at a large plant covering two acres on the north edge of the town. It was Cyrus Isbell's place of business.

CONTRACTORS' & BUILDERS' SUPPLIES

the long sign across the front announced.

Piles of lumber, building stone, sand and clay, gravel and other requisites of construction filled the great yards. Isbell was doing a rushing trade. Long drays and wagons carrying loads were leaving while empty ones were lined up, awaiting their turn. Most of them were marked with the names of the contractors owning them, while Isbell's numerous employes were busily filling orders.

El Chicaro entered the main office, marked with Cyrus Isbell's name. Hatfield hung around in the shade across the road, keeping out of sight. The sun was lowering to the blue Colorado range and it was near quitting time when the Pea reappeared, walking at the side of a large, beefy man who dwarfed the little Mexican in spite of his high-crowned sombrero.

"That's Isbell," thought the interested Ranger, "and I've seen him before."

Cargill and others had given him a description of the wholesale contractor but Hatfield had previously noticed Isbell on two or three occasions, although he seldom remained long in Austin between forays.

Isbell was fattish of jowl, and his clothes were expensive. Diamonds reflected the lingering sunlight with scintillating flashes from the white stock at his bull throat, from the rings on his heavy hands. He moved with a ponderous but regal stride, a man to command, assured of his power.

CHAPTER VII

Trail

A FINE carriage with a coachman and footman awaited Isbell. The beefy, lumber czar nodded to Enriquez and

climbed in, sinking heavily into the upholstery. *El Chicaro* mounted his horse and rode alongside the carriage, chatting with Isbell as they drove off.

The Ranger was thinking—Dogface Lucas had been bailed out by Enriquez' sister. The Pea was a close business associate of Cyrus Isbell's. With these two facts in mind, Hatfield hunted an opening in the trail on which he was setting out. Isbell was strong, influential. To pin down such a man in wrong-doing would mean that the proof must be iron-clad, and the connection between Isbell and what was happening on the range and in town established beyond the shadow of a doubt. Isbell could claim that only a correct business relationship existed between himself and Enriquez, the Mexican selling work animals to the contractor.

Hatfield knew he had his work cut out for him in following this trail, but he also knew he must watch his back and move in a circumspect manner, for Dogface's men and probably *El Chicaro's* knife-and-gun experts were hunting him.

The Pea and Isbell went into an expensive restaurant where they were joined by two elegantly clad young women. The party entered a private dining parlor and settled down for drinks and a leisurely supper. It was not feasible for Hatfield to work close enough to overhear their talk, and since he decided they would spend the evening there he left and rode to the Robertsons' cottage.

The town lay tranquil in her setting, a violet crown over her as the hills at evening were tinged by a faintly purplish mist.

Anita and Buck welcomed their tall friend. Dinner was about ready and it was a pleasure for the Ranger to enjoy a bit of home life. While pretty Anita was serving the meal, Hatfield gave Buck instructions.

"Put on yore oldest clothes, Buck," he said. "Go down to Juan Enriquez's yard early in the mornin' and see can yuh get a job tendin' stock. Keep yore ears and eyes open and if yuh catch anything interestin', let me know pronto."

Buck, trusted by the lawman, was fast becoming a skilled observer, due to the training he had been given by the Ranger. He would miss little of value at *El Chicaro's*, especially as he knew all the facts in Hatfield's possession.

Patient as Hatfield could be when that was required, he was aware that he might watch Isbell and Enriquez for weeks without chancing on anything tangible to help in the investigation. Anything learned would have to be in a roundabout way for orders for the killing of opponents could be carried by go-betweens in a fashion impossible to detect by observation alone.

Next day he again looked over the Pea's place. Buck was around in a ragged suit and old straw sombrero, watering the animals, slaving away at a lowly job. Evidently he had managed to persuade *El Chicaro* to give him work.

The following evening when Hatfield met his aide at the cottage, Buck had news for him.

"An hombre named Cos Collins had a bangup scrap with Enriquez this afternoon," reported Buck. "I was settin' under the winder and heard every word of it. Collins is a contractor, savvy? He was mighty riled up at the high prices he's bein' charged for work hosses and oxen and laborers supplied by the Pea. He shore kicked over the traces.

"He mentioned Isbell, too. Said Enriquez and Isbell were pushin' costs sky-high for Civil War veterans and the public in general, that it was pure, unadulterated thievin'. Collins threatened to tell the newspapers and the world just what was goin' on. The Pea flew off the handle, too, and called Collins a loco fool. He did some threatenin' on his own—told Collins he'd shore be unhappy if he dared spout all that stuff.

"At that Collins sort of backed down, but when he rode off his face was red and he was mad clean through. Enriquez moved out right after Collins left. I think mebbe he went to see Isbell, but I ain't shore."

"Huh! Yuh may have hit somethin'." The Ranger nodded. "One thing's shore—I'll go see Cos Collins right away."

AFTER dinner he set out alone. It was easy to find where the builder lived, on the northwest outskirts of town. The road was a quiet residential one, with the roomy homes set off in spacious, tree-shaded grounds. Hatfield rode on

past it, looking in at the lamplit windows, which were open to the warm night.

"If they move at all they'll move pronto," he thought, with the deaths of Gregory and Fralee on his mind. Perhaps they, too, had dared rebel against the tightening grasp of Isbell.

He went to the next corner, and turned it, leaving the golden sorrel in the shadows. The tall officer could move silently when he wished and now he fairly flitted through the darkness toward Cos Collin's house. He was certain that he himself was not being trailed, but if it should be decided that Collins must be dealt with, agents might be sent to him that very night.

The center of Austin was below this higher level, with terraces and streets spreading in a twinkling panorama, which the rising moon silvered the Colorado. Hatfield could hear pleasant homely sounds—the voices of children, someone playing a violin and a woman singing, now and then the opening or shutting of a door, the piping of crickets and tree frogs.

The big yard around the Collin's home was planted with ornamental shrubs and two iron deer stood at either side of the gravel drive. Oaks and elms towered over the roof.

Hatfield watched for a time but seeing nothing to warn him of enemy activity, went in through a side gate. He was on the darker side, and the path led to a door giving onto a veranda furnished with rocking-chairs and benches. This was not the main entry but it suited the Ranger, who knocked and waited until a man answered.

"Mr. Collins at home?"

"Who wants him?"

The man who stood in the doorway seemed wary, nervous. He was wearing black trousers, slippers, and a white shirt open at the throat. A pistol had been stuck in his back pocket. He was a man of medium height, with brown hair, a stubborn chin, and black eyes. His forehead was furrowed, and his face was etched with deep lines of care. He was nearing fifty, but only his temples were touched by gray.

"I've come to help yuh, suh." Hatfield was pretty sure that this was Collins himself. The contractor would be shaky, as this man was, no doubt worried over the quarrel with *El Chicaro.*

"Who sent yuh?" the man demanded. "What do yuh mean?" He was suspicious, and wary of a trap.

It was vital for him to be set at ease, so Hatfield opened his hand in which was cupped the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers. Cos Collins blinked and jumped.

"Come in," he growled.

Hatfield walked into a library, furnished with leather chairs and shelves of books. Collins stared at the rugged officer, obviously impressed by his strength, and yet fearful of what was threatening.

"Yuh had a fight with Juan Enriquez this afternoon, suh," the Ranger said. "I've heard about it. Yuh told him yuh'd expose his shady dealin's and Cy Isbell's to the papers."

Cos Collins caught a sharp breath, as he backed to the wall. He made a weak gesture with one hand, brushing at his paling face.

"I—I don't savvy what yuh're talkin' about, Ranger. I got no complaint."

Children's voices, a woman's tones, came from the main front room. Through the connecting doors Hatfield could see two handsome boys, a girl, and a pleasant-faced woman of about forty, smiling at the children as they entertained themselves after the evening meal.

"Chances are yuh've wrecked yoreself with *El Chicaro,*" drawled the Ranger. "He went to see Isbell after yuh rode off in a huff. Have yuh forgotten Fralee and Gregory so soon? Or is that why yuh're afraid to talk to me? Mebbe I could save yuh if yuh'll tell me the truth about it all."

Collins shuddered. He closed the door.

"Sit down," he invited, his voice thick. "Let me speak to my wife, will yuh?"

"Go to it."

Hatfield dropped into a leather armchair and began rolling a quirly. A single lamp burned low in the library and through the doors, open again, he could see Cos Collins and his wife in the main room.

The parents were hustling their children off to bed. When the little ones had gone upstairs the builder bent over his wife's chair, consulting with her in low

tones. She looked around and shook her head. She seemed terrified.

Suddenly Hatfield hurled away his tobacco sack and papers, surging to his feet. Just past Cos Collins and his wife an open window gave out on the lawn. In this opening a pinkish, fury-twisted face appeared. Red-rimmed, glaring eyes lighted this savage countenance which seemed to belong to some fiend from the pit.

Collins had his back to the window. He uttered one sharp scream that cut off short. His hands flew to his throat and he was violently pulled to the opening, flexing as he fought for breath.

Hatfield acted with blinding speed. A heavy Colt jumped into his slim, trained hand. The hammer spur came back under his thumb joint, cocking the weapon by its own weight as it rose.

But Mrs. Collins, seeing her husband gasping and dying before her eyes, as he was dragged across the sill, sprang from her seat and screaming hysterically, bravely running to help him. Her body was in the line of fire and the Ranger dared not aim close for fear of hitting her.

He bounded through the hall into the living room and, pistol raised, tried a high shot which crashed through the upper section of the window. The raised pane broke with tinklings of cracking glass.

"Watch out, Mrs. Collins!" roared Hatfield, eager to drill the man who had so boldly attacked Cos Collins in his home.

She was trying to prevent her husband from being yanked bodily through the window, but her strength was not great enough. The contractor, his wind cut off, had lost the power to defend himself and his struggles were weaker and weaker as he was held bent back over the sill, head and shoulders outside.

Hatfield's weight shook the floor as he raced across it to throw himself into the fray. Gun up, he was hampered by the frantic wife, who screamed at the top of her voice.

In the shaft of light from the lamps Hatfield glimpsed a long-bladed, shining knife gripped in a hand at the end of a snakelike arm. The assailant meant to stab Collins!

Hatfield tried a second bullet, chancing one which sang close to the screaming woman.

CHAPTER VIII

"Cut Him Down to Size!"

SOMEONE uttered an animal-like, startled yelp. The knife descended, but slowly, and then Collins, overbalanced by the weight of his upper body, disappeared as his legs slid out of sight across the window sill.

Hatfield was at the window now. He was framed for the attacker in the opening but he kept moving, pushing Mrs. Collins aside to save her life and diving through. He landed in soft earth near the foundation of the home, his arm striking Cos Collins who lay quiet as he had fallen.

The Ranger came up in a crouch, hunting with his eyes for the pink-faced killer who had struck with such bold savagery. He glimpsed a shadow loping to the rear of the house. As he swung his Colt in that direction, a revolver flamed and he heard the shriek of metal past his ear.

Hatfield let go a breath later, his hurried shot whipping in the night at the receding wraith. He swore under his breath, for he knew he had missed. The target was a difficult one, moving and turning, and slipped around the corner.

"Cos, Cos! Oh, is he dead?" Mrs. Collins was wringing her hands as she leaned from the window.

Hatfield felt for Collins' throat and his fingers encountered fine but strong piano wire which had been looped around the builder's neck, and drawn so taut it cut the skin. But as he loosened the noose he knew the man had to be given first aid.

"Here, ma'am," he called. "Let me lift yuh down. See what yuh can do for him."

His strong arms set her on the ground and she knelt beside her husband. Hatfield ran to the back of the house on the trail of the pink-faced assassin.

There were lights in the kitchen and a Mexican woman was crouched there, evidently frozen in fright by the alarming sounds she had heard. As Hatfield passed a window in a shaft of light, a bullet sang over him and plugged into the wooden

frame. The gun flash had come a hundred yards off, down the back lane from the Collins home.

He hurried toward the lane. His keen ears caught the *clop-clop* of shod hoofs. The garroter was in swift retreat, must have had a mount waiting behind the stable.

Hatfield whistled up his sorrel but by the time he hit leather and took up the pursuit the killer had gained a long start, and there were no more signs to guide the aroused officer. He wasted half an hour hunting dark byways, pistol up and cocked, but there were too many hiding places and side paths, for him to hope to explore them all. Realizing the futility of it, he retraced his route to the contractor's home.

Mrs. Collins and the Mexican servant had carried Collins into the house and laid him on a couch. He was breathing, and his eyes were open. A crimson line circled his neck and there was a jagged knife slash in his right arm, but he was swiftly recovering and had no fatal wounds.

Hatfield had managed to divert the pink-faced attacker, enough to save Collins from death.

"Ranger!" whispered the builder, his voice weak and hoarse from the choking he had received.

Hatfield had picked up the length of silver wire. It was several feet in length with a noose at one end. The officer carefully brought a folding screen from a corner and set it up so that Collins was shielded from the windows.

"Just in case he snakes back," he growled.

Pulling up a chair, he sat beside the contractor. Collins stared up into the rugged face, grim from the close squeak which had occurred, and with the knowledge of how serious the situation was.

"I'm goin' to talk, Margaret," Collins said tensely. "They're set on killin' me and I've got nothin' to lose by helpin' the law."

She nodded. Her face was pale and she was biting her lips. She studied the big Ranger, and hope came into her worried eyes. Collins began to tell his story then, pausing often for breath. It was hard for him to speak for his throat had been badly savaged by the taut wire.

"I was forced to pay the prices they ask," he said huskily. "Enriquez and Isbell too. . . . Everybody in town has to—or else. We savvy—what happened to Ban Gregory—and Tim Fralee. Figger they bucked—Isbell—boss of all contractin' here."

"Has Isbell ever threatened yuh?" asked Hatfield.

"Never. He just tells us what we pay. I had that squabble with *El Chicaro* and he warned me I'd—regret rebellin'. He was shore—right." Collins coughed and his hand gingerly stroked his hurt throat.

"Isbell has a real stranglehold on yuh fellers, that's a cinch," remarked Hatfield. "Could yuh swear to that pink-faced sidewinder who just tried for yuh?"

COLLINS shook his head. He had not even seen his assailant, who had struck from behind. Mrs. Collins was not much better as a witness.

"I was so frightened!" she said with a shudder. "He looked like Satan himself."

From Cos Collins the Ranger obtained a true picture of the dread felt by Austin contractors. They knew that Cyrus Isbell was taking control of the building trades in the town and its environs. But if they would not pay the set prices, if they dared threaten to kick over the traces as had Collins, then they knew death would strike without further warning. Yet the agents who killed had no visible connection with Isbell.

It was shaping up in Hatfield's mind, however. The real estate boom inflated the value of land, of building requisites such as stone, lime and timber. Cy Isbell was waxing rich.

"I'll have a Ranger recruit sent here to guard you day and night, Mr. Collins," he said. "Meanwhile, have yuh any men yuh trust?"

Collins had workers who had been with him for years, he said.

Hatfield helped him upstairs. Doors and windows were securely fastened and Collins had a shotgun and pistol by his bed.

Having done all he could for the present, the Ranger took his leave. He rode to the homes of two of the friends Collins had mentioned, and warned them to hurry to their employer to guard his life.

The capture of Dogface Lucas had indeed started him on a most perilous trail, he mused. Teresa Gasca had led to *El Chicaro,* the Pea to Isbell. Now the game was growing clearer. Isbell, it appeared, had a strong, hidden outlaw organization. The beefy wholesaler squatted in Austin like a giant tarantula in its nest, but he pulled the strings while the range was being threatened by Lucas and such outside agents, all helping to supply Isbell with what he needed to carry on, with no cost—aside from men's lives.

Again Hatfield headed for Ranger headquarters which remained open day and night. McDowell had only a handful of officers to patrol the immense reaches of the Lone Star empire, but as a rule he kept a few recruits at Austin barracks for emergencies. At Hatfield's order, when he arrived there, a desk clerk awoke and dispatched a man to Cos Collin's home for sentry duty. Jim Hatfield turned in.

The next morning the tall officer told McDowell all that had occurred.

"I'm goin' to start a hunt for that pink-faced hombre, Cap'n," he said grimly. "I'll warn Buck about him and if yuh get any news on such a feller in town, let me know right off. I aim to fix myself up and try Isbell himself. He may savvy me, but I'd like to see how he behaves, if I can."

"Cuss him!" growled the old Ranger chief. "He's mighty strong, but we'll cut him down to size. Watch yore hide, Hatfield. Want me along?" McDowell loved action. But duty usually pinned him to his desk.

"No, suh." Hatfield shook his head. "Isbell would shorely recognize yuh. There's just a toss-up I'll learn anything myself, but if I'm to do it I need to size him up eye to eye. If he's on to me it could panic him, thinkin' we're closin' in. Might stop these killin's for a time till we can clean out Isbell and his bunch."

"Fling down the gantlet!" agreed McDowell, fire in his eye. "That's the ticket! I'm right with yuh every move."

"We must learn how Isbell operates and trap his chief helpers. That will take hard work, suh. And like yuh said we need to cinch proof so Isbell can't slip free."

The Ranger went to change. He donned fawn colored trousers and a long-tailed black coat, a white shirt and a stock. He stuck a Colt in his belt under the coat and borrowed a silk hat from a businessman he knew.

He decided to leave the handsome Goldy at headquarters, for the sorrel might be recognized. Saddling a stock mount from the corral he was about to ride off when he saw Asa Lockhart approaching on Tuffy, the flash rider's chestnut gelding.

Lockhart had news. "I come to tell yuh that Mr. Cargill had another narrer squeak, Ranger. Someone took a long try at him and shot his hoss from under him yesterday. Dogface Lucas is lurkin' around us again. Runnin' off our animals and Labry's, too. It was a close shave for the boss, I tell yuh. The bullet bit a hunk from his chap leg."

"Tell Cargill to lie low and the way I said," instructed the Ranger. "I'll be along as soon as I can. I got plenty to do in town, and it's all hooked up with what's happenin' out there, Ace."

AFTER taking leave of Lockhart Hatfield rode to Cyrus Isbell's business establishment, the spacious yards on the northern perimeter of Austin. Buck Robertson was busy in *El Chicaro's* compound and would keep an eye out for any new developments. His tip on the Cos Collins matter had proved most valuable.

Cursing teamsters plying long whips lashed their horses and mules off from the yard with loaded drays. Empty carriers were lined up as wagons were filled with lumber and other building materials. Busy employes hurried to and fro, helping fill orders.

The main office occupied the lower corner of the building, set off from the noisy scene. It was of cool, whitewashed adobe brick and Isbell's name was on the entrance sign. The day was bright, for the sun had come up with golden beauty.

Hatfield left his horse in the shade, rein over a rail. He entered the offices and found himself in a shadowed anteroom. At a desk guarding a door marked "Private" sat an alert young fellow who sized up the tall visitor.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"I got important business with Mr. Is-

bell," drawled the Ranger. "My handle is James J. Haley. I'm in the contractor game and I want supplies. Aim to put up two dozen homes on some land I just bought up the river."

The secretary nodded. "Mr. Isbell should be in soon. You can wait or come back."

"I'll set it out," said Hatfield.

CHAPTER IX

Reprisals

JIM HATFIELD took a seat on a bench along the wall, and picked up a copy of the Austin *Statesman*. It was the one in which the deaths of Ban Gregory and Tim Fralee had been announced.

CONTRACTORS SLAIN BY FIENDISH KILLERS!

Hatfield read the story again as he waited. Shouts and the creakings of ungreased wheels came dimly through the thick walls. Business as usual was going on outside.

Twenty minutes later he glanced through a curtained window to watch the beefy Isbell descend from his victoria. The calash top had been thrown back and a uniformed coachman with a feather in his top hat was handling the reins.

Isbell wore an imported Scotch tweed today, a custom-made suit. He fancied a stock at his throat, and a diamond stickpin was slanted in the white folds. He moved with regal deliberation as he got from the carriage, leaning on a thick, knobby cane with a golden head. His jowls hung low and the effects of rich living showed in the puffy eyes and depraved face. His fat hands were hairy. His soft hat was pulled down on one side of his massive head.

Though apparently slow, Isbell exuded strength, and his dark eyes were very much alive. He entered the anteroom and did not miss the customer on the bench.

"He savvies me!" decided Hatfield.

It was only a flicking glance which touched him yet he had the sensation that Isbell knew just who and what he was. Isbell showed no visible sign of it, though. Nodding to the clerk, he went on into his inner sanctum.

"I'll ask him to see you, Mr. Haley," said the attendant, following his employer inside and closing the door.

After a time he emerged and stood at the side of the entrance.

"Mr. Isbell will see you now, sir."

Hatfield brushed past the secretary and paused on a thick green carpet. Isbell was ensconced behind a wide mahogany desk. The fat hands were folded on the blotter and Isbell was leaning forward, his weight on his forearms. He had removed his hat, showing his thinnish hair which was pomaded in sharp ridges across his bulging skull. Within his reach were jars and boxes of candies—taffy and chocolates and preserved ginger. Isbell's jowls worked almost imperceptibly as he chewed on a sweet.

He did not avoid the officer's gray-green gaze. "Sit down," he invited. The taffy in his cheek thickened his voice a bit.

A chair across the desk was arranged so that the light would fall on a caller's features. Hatfield took it. Obviously Isbell was ready for him, though he could detect no sign of alarm in the contractor. Isbell was relaxed and fully at ease, yet the Ranger believed that through his arrest of Dogface Lucas, or perhaps by other means, Isbell was aware of his identity.

The two opponents, both strong men, studied each other silently but frankly, measuring for the life-and-death struggle that must ensue.

Hatfield broke the thick silence. He spoke in a soft, drawling voice.

"I've bought me a hunk of land northwest of town, suh. I aim to build some houses on it and I need supplies—lumber, lime, stone and all. I'm lookin' for work animals too."

Isbell's expression did not change. "Where is this land? My secretary mentioned what you wanted." The contractor maintained his easy manner, not stooping to insolence. He felt he was superior to the visitor and made no attempt to hide it.

"It's northwest of the city. Part of the

Deecee Ranch. Dillard Cargill's sellin' a section."

Isbell's thick brows rose, then he shrugged.

"Have you taken title yet?"

"No suh."

"When you do, come to me with the deed. We require a ten per cent cash binder on all sales. Have a list of what you require and the money."

"How about oxen and work hosses?"

"You mean you haven't run upon Enriquez yet?" asked Isbell lazily.

There was a deep sarcasm in this but Hatfield feigned not to notice it. "I heard of him, suh."

"You can buy as many animals as you wish at his compound in the Mexican quarter."

Isbell seemed secretly amused at his own irony. His puffy eyes narrowed though he did not outwardly laugh.

THERE was not the slightest chance of tricking Isbell into a false move by a roping maneuver, Hatfield saw, because the wholesaler knew him. With the air of a wise counselor offering advice to a neophyte, Isbell continued:

"I must warn you, young man. It's true there's a great demand for building in and near Austin, but that doesn't mean it's all beer and skittles. It's a risky game. Prices of materials and animals are sky-high and reaching for the moon. If you sign too many contracts at current costs you may find yourself buying at a much higher figure later when you start construction.

"You'll bump into trouble with the authorities over this and other details. They'll send officials, even policemen, after you if you make a mistake. However, in case you run into anything like that all you need do is come to me. I'll take care of it. I have real power and influence in the city and the state.

"Some fear the Texas Rangers, for instance. They are supposed to be above the run-of-the-mill sheriff or constable. But in my position I can easily squelch them. They're commanded by the adjutant general and above him is the Governor. Political considerations sway them. Complaints from businessmen against the Rangers will alarm them and charges lodged by reputable citizens can cause dismissal and disgrace for the offending officer. All I need do is crook a finger and I can smash any two-bit eyeballer the way you step on a fat white grub!"

With the slang a crude harshness came into Isbell's voice. The toughness under that smooth, beefy coating was suddenly exposed, as he stared at Hatfield, his eyes blazing while he warned off the Ranger.

Then he drew back into his shell, shrugged, and reached for another piece of taffy which he popped into his mouth with an audible smack.

"Yuh're shore the man I want to deal with!" cried Hatfield admiringly. "I'd like mighty well to see yuh take care of an upstart Ranger. Most folks think they're too salty."

"You may get your wish sooner than you think," growled Isbell.

He was tiring of the duel of wits. He picked up a sheaf of papers and rattled it, to show he was busy. Hatfield nodded and rose.

"Yuh'll hear from me again and pronto, suh," he said. "Don't forget."

"I don't forget. Ever." The corner of Isbell's lip curled up. He was angry, but sure of himself.

Hatfield took his leave. He rode back to headquarters, aware that he was being trailed by two riders in black suits who discreetly remained a block to his rear. No doubt Isbell had sent them to watch him.

Hatfield switched back to riding clothes and saddled the golden sorrel. Isbell's agents were no longer in sight when he brought Goldy in front of headquarters. He set out at random and tried waiting at several corners to catch possible trailers, but he was not being followed.

He rode out to Cos Collins' home then, where a recruit was on duty. The pink-faced killer who had come in the night had made no further attempt on Collins.

The Ranger had a Mexican friend, owner of a small store in the southeast section, and decided it would be well to make a call on him. He had no wish to endanger or even embarrass Francisco, so he approached by a roundabout route and checked up behind him before knocking on the back door.

A fat Mexican woman let him in. She kissed him soundly and smiled toothily on him as she welcomed him in voluble

Spanish. She was Francisco's wife.

She brought the storekeeper to the kitchen. The Ranger's *amigo* was squat and wide, with a heavy white mustache of which he was inordinately proud and which he loved to stroke. He, too, was delighted to see the tall Ranger and his seamed face broke into myriad wrinkles as he shook hands.

But when Hatfield mentioned *El Chicaro,* Francisco gulped and looked worried.

"*Si, si.* He ees boss here."

The Pea plainly was influential among the peons. Francisco agreed that Enriquez was exploiting those he commanded but the Pea was a fine orator and they looked to him as *el jefe,* their chief. Francisco promised to listen and remember anything of value he heard about the patron.

"I'm also huntin' a tall hombre with a pink face," Hatfield told the Mexican storekeeper. "He's a strangler and knife artist, Francisco. I don't savvy his handle yet. There's a chance he might hide out in the quarter."

FRANCISCO shrugged. His wife brought wine and cakes which she pressed on the visitor, and the conversation became general, on other subjects.

After dark, Hatfield called at Anita's cottage. Buck was at home, having returned from the long day at the Pea's compound. He had no further important information but was learning details about *El Chicaro's* affairs.

The next morning Hatfield rose early and breakfasted. He was smoking a quirly outside headquarters when Captain McDowell rode up. The old fellow was crimson of face and sputtering with rage.

"There's been another killin'!" he shouted. "Come on!"

They hurried to the Austin police station. In the back room lay a dead citizen, about his neck a noose of silver piano wire.

"Name is Lewis," a city officer told them. "We had an alarm last night. His wife told us of a red-faced hombre she had glimpsed after dark. She believes this cuss killed her husband."

The police had hunted for Lewis, the officer said, but it was not until dawn that they had found his body near the river bank.

In an hour the Rangers had all available information. Lewis had been the owner of a large tract of land in Austin. A factory was being constructed on it. Checking up, Hatfield found that Cyrus Isbell's company held a large mortgage against Lewis' property, duly recorded at the land office.

CHAPTER X

Transfer

BEFORE Hatfield had completed his own investigation of the Lewis killing, it was afternoon. He went back to headquarters and entered McDowell's offices to inform his superior of what he had discovered.

"The same outlaw who went for Cos Collins caught Lewis, suh," he reported. "We've got to find the cuss and check him. I've got a reason to believe he follers orders from Isbell, who has an interest in Lewis' lands. I can't find out for shore right off, because Mrs. Lewis can hardly speak. She's lyin' up at home in a terrible state. But she told me she didn't savvy much about her husband's business affairs and she can't help us against Isbell."

McDowell crouched in his chair, scowling. He cleared his throat and had difficulty in meeting Hatfield's steady, gray-green gaze. "What's wrong, Boss?" demanded the tall officer.

McDowell snatched up a paper. "After yuh left this mornin' I got this! It's an official order to ship Ranger J. Hatfield off to El Paso, just as far away as yuh can be sent. 'Important investigation under way,' this claims. Yuh're to report to the city marshal and cooperate with him in every legal manner."

"Isbell!" growled the Ranger. "The sidewinder wasn't talkin' through his greased hat. He got mighty fast results, Cap'n."

McDowell was in a state similar to that of a large, rumbling volcano on the point of blowin' its entire top. He banged a gnarled fist on the desk and the inkwell

jumped up and turned over.

"I'll go to the adjutant!" he howled. "I'll see the Governor! I'll quit before I let Isbell dictate to the Rangers!"

Hatfield thought it over. "It would be a feather in Isbell's cap if he forced yuh to resign, suh," he reminded. "He's managed to put pressure on us through honest officials. Mebbe we can turn it to account. S'pose I pack up and ride off like I'm obeyin' orders, and am on my way to El Paso? There's a chance we might fool Isbell into thinkin' I'd really left. I'll keep hid and he may make a mistake, believin' I ain't around."

"It's an idea. I'll do what yuh say, Jim. Here." McDowell initialed the order and passed it to Hatfield.

Half an hour later the Ranger moved off from headquarters on Goldy. At his cantle was a pack rolled in his poncho. A carbine in a waterproof cover was in the socket under a long leg. McDowell waved to him as he swung toward the river road, as he always did when sending his best Ranger into the field.

When Hatfield glanced back after a few blocks he found that several *vaqueros* in high-peaked sombreros and colorful Mexican clothing were coming after him. They were bunched and watching him.

"We saw a couple of 'em at *El Chicaro's*, Goldy," the Ranger murmured to his sorrel.

When he slowed the *vaqueros* slowed, and they showed no disposition to begin a free-for-all.

"I reckon they want to make shore we're leavin'," he concluded.

Since he wanted the enemy to think he was quitting Austin and the vicinity, he kept going. *El Chicaro's* gunslingers stayed with him but at a safe distance to the rear when they reached the open highway, with Mount Bonnell looming ahead.

Hatfield let the sorrel take it easy. He was in no hurry, for he meant to wait for darkness before doubling back.

Nearly two hours later, on the dirt track to the Cargill ranch, he approached the stretch which came so close to the ridge on which he had arrested Dogface Lucas. He looked over his shoulder, drawing up in the shade. The *vaqueros*, a quarter mile behind now, also pulled rein and sat eyeing him.

Hatfield studied the ragged brush line on the south lip of the fatal ridge.

"I got a feelin'," he muttered. So instead of staying on the road he cut south toward Walnut Creek and took the hard way through a stretch of rocky, broken country.

A couple of pistol shots came from the *vaqueros*. They were digging in their spurs and galloping at full-tilt along the beaten track. Then horsemen were breaking out of the woods, sliding down the steep slopes to the road. There were forty or fifty of them and they streamed south, forming a wide arc and cutting Hatfield off from the Cargill ranch.

One of them was Dogface Lucas, that notorious horse thief. Hatfield recognized him urging on his men. The *vaqueros* from Austin joined the chase, whooping it up and opening fire at long range.

On the golden sorrel, he splashed across Walnut Creek, Colt in hand. So that was where Lucas had been waiting for him, knowing he might be passing en route to the west!

Reaching the lower bank the Ranger came out on cleared range and galloped off, droplets of water flying from Goldy's sheening hide.

Some of Dogface's riders had pelted up the highway to prevent him from getting around the end of the trail. Others were crossing the creek, baying on his heels.

The Ranger held his fire, trusting to the fleetness of his mount to get him out of gun range. Goldy flew on. And Hatfield knew that a slip would mean death!

* * * * *

ASA LOCKHART, bronc buster and trainer of wild horses for the Deecee, moved slowly across wooded bottom land. He held his lariat ready to cast, for he could read enough sign in soft ground to tell him that there were horses up the nearby draw.

Lockhart was riding a gunmetal mustang with a DC brand, an animal he was training for Cargill. He always saved Tuffy, his own chestnut gelding, for special occasions. It was the custom for a bronco buster to use the horses of the outfit he was working for, so he could

save his own mount.

The day before, Lockhart had ridden into Austin, carrying a message from Cargill to the tall Texas Ranger who had been sent to assist the cowmen. He had made the round trip without interference, but both Cargill and Labry were on guard against horse and cattle thieves and hoped that soon they would be able to rid the range of those dangerous and costly pests, Lucas' bunch.

Work around the ranch had to go on in spite of everything else. Lockhart was doing his best to capture and break horses, although Cargill had ordered him not to venture far away from home base. So each evening he returned to the Deecee.

He had been up late the night before, sitting on the ranchhouse porch with Claire, and it had been a momentous evening. He had asked her to marry him and she had said she would. That had been enough to inspire any young fellow, and Lockhart had been treading on air all day.

He had started out after breakfast to hunt a small band of mustangs he had sighted a few miles from the ranch. South lay the road into Austin but between it and where he was now was broken country with a high, wooded ridge cutting him off from the highway. The ridge ran east to west for several miles—the road on which Hatfield had captured Dogface Lucas, at a point where the sharper south slope overlooked the incurving road. Northward, the elevation slanted more gradually to the grassy bottoms and was cut by patches of timber. It was the kind of country which mustangs loved.

A small feeder which eventually found its way to Walnut Creek came down the hill, having cut a deep, narrow bed. Springs above fed it. When it rained hard the stream flooded and brought down stones and soil, spreading out into a swamplike basin.

The horses he was trailing had entered a blind draw. Brush screened the entrance and the mustangs—Deecee stock animals which had been turned out the year before—believed themselves undetected. Lockhart dismounted and crept forward on foot to a vantage point from which he could peer through the brush and see half a dozen of them grazing on the lush grass.

The gate which had been placed here converged enough so that with a spare rope and brush he could close it effectively enough so the horses would not attempt to crash it unless unduly alarmed and stampeded. But of course they were not really wild horses, but work stock set free to graze.

When all was artistically arranged Lockhart picked up his reins, mounted, and rode slowly on. The mustangs retreated until they were cut off by the sharp rise of the ridge. He soon drew near enough to one brown gelding to make a cast. The whistling noose settled over the mustang's head and it was not long until Lockhart had him secured and saddled. He rode the brown animal until the mustang gave up.

Lockhart broke three more of them before he stopped. After the usual bucking antics, all of them surrendered to the man's skill and power.

It was warm at mid-day and Lockhart rested in the shade near where the rill had formed a pool, and ate the lunch Claire had packed for him. He smoked a cigarette, then went back to work. It was a routine job for him, and yet he loved horses and handling them so much that he enjoyed the thrill of subduing a savage, fighting horse.

He lost only one of the mustangs, a spooky, rawboned bay which panicked and tore past him, leaping a clump of dead brush which Lockhart had placed as a barricade. He fashioned a lead-rope, put loops about the neck of each animal, and in the late afternoon made ready to return to the Deecee with the horses.

IT WAS then that in the distance he heard gunfire. It seemed two or three miles away, but it worried him. The road to the ranch lay in that direction and it was on the other side of the ridge that Cargill had been fired upon. He paused, listening. The shooting died away. Hearing no more of it, Lockhart turned to get his horse and head for home.

As he swung he found two men intently regarding him. They must have stolen up on foot, and silently. One was a tall Mexican in a sombrero and char-

acteristic Mexican clothing. He had a fierce mustache and beady eyes, and his narrow brown face was scowling as he gripped a pearl-handled six-shooter. The other man wore brown doeskin and a flat-topped Stetson. He was a vicious-looking Texan with the slit mouth and typical expression of a deadly character. He lowered a double-barreled shotgun on Lockhart, the hammer back.

"Reach!" he snarled. "It's that cussed bronc wrestler."

The shotgun could not miss at a few yards. Lockhart put up his hands.

"Well?" he demanded. "What's up, boys?"

"No use playin' innercint." The Texan cursed him roundly. "I guess I'll pull trigger and watch yuh squirm."

"Don't shoot hees boots," warned the *vaquero* quickly. "Zey are mine—veree nize."

CHAPTER XI

Captured

WHILE Lockhart had not bumped into these two particular specimens before, he was convinced they must be members of Dogface Lucas' band. He kept silent, for the Texan was just waiting for a slight excuse to pump him full of lead.

As the shotgun held him the Mexican slipped up behind him and snatched his pistol and knife. Then the *vaquero* gave him a sudden, sharp shove between the shoulder-blades, laughing as he stuck a booted foot in front of the prisoner. Lockhart tripped and went down on his hands. The Mexican jumped on him, his spurred, sharp high heels cutting into the small of Lockhart's back and flattening him.

Under the shotgun, the flash rider's expensive boots were yanked off. The *vaquero* held them aloft, crowing in pleasure, delighted with his prize.

"I'll run him to camp and see what Dogface says when he comes back," announced the Texan. "Rafael, yuh see to them horses."

The outlaw refused to allow Lockhart to ride, but forced him to get up and walk ahead in his bare feet. The Mexican stayed behind to secure the mustangs, including Ace's mount.

Thorns and sharp stones cut at Lockhart's feet and soon he could scarcely set one before the other. He limped anyway, and as they moved over rocky, heavily wooded areas it was almost too much for him to bear. His captor seemed to consider it humorous and chuckled at the bronc buster's discomfort.

The course was generally eastward, behind the bulking ridges. Lockhart bit his lip, determined not to complain or show any weakening, although it was more than a mile to the hidden camp. Reaching the spot at last, Lockhart saw that it was set in an oval ampitheater with undercut sides sheltering those who slept there. Supplies and gear lay around. There were signs that large numbers of horses and cattle had been brought here, and held for a time in the crude pole corrals below the hideout.

Three outlaws were in the camp. One hobbled about with a crutch fashioned from a tree limb crotch, while the others were wearing bandages. Lockhart concluded they must be casualties from the fighting which had been going on between the Deecee and the horse thieves.

The camp was cunningly screened, and fires could be built beneath jutting cliffs which would break up and dissipate smoke. The road to the south, connecting Austin and the west, could be covered by the outlaws easily enough. It was not far away—just over the top of the ridge. He could see that in driving stolen stock eastward the thieves had a beaten path through the woods and rolling range so they could reach Austin without showing themselves on the public highway.

The wounded men appeared to be of mean disposition and were rough in aspect. Lockhart realized now that he had seen them with Dogface Lucas. They began swearing at him, making him the butt of their irritation and pain, since he belonged to the opposing faction. They poked at him with rifle barrels and sticks, and when Lockhart tried to defend himself they knocked him down and trussed his ankles and wrists.

He was kicked and beaten with quirts until his head began to swim and faintness gripped him.

Night was falling when more outlaws began coming into camp, leaving their horses below. Dogface Lucas finally appeared, a thick-butted black quirt hanging from his wrist. Big and muscular, Dogface came and stood over Lockhart, cursing in surprised pleasure at the capture. He pushed back his Stetson from his matted, clay-colored hair that was damp with sweat. His pale eyes were cruel as he scanned the captive. He was perhaps the ugliest man Lockhart had ever seen, with his bared teeth and bulldog expression.

"Say, Bernie, yuh caught us a real fish!" he chortled as his men gathered round to stare at the unhappy Lockhart. "He'll come in mighty handy. I can use this sidewinder." He stirred the prostrate bronc buster, lying with his shoulders against a boulder, with a sharp boot toe. "Yuh've made us plenty of trouble, hombre, and now yuh'll pay for it."

Dark fell over the bivouac which was only a temporary hideout which Lucas had set up for the purpose of attacking the local range, and as a depot for stolen horses and cattle. More and more bandits straggled in until Lockhart decided there were at least fifty. He heard sentries being posted against the possibility of any surprise in the night.

THE gunslingers who had been on the move were tired out, thirsty, hungry and irritable. Fires were started with tinder and fed with dry chunks of wood. Appetizing odors of coffee coming to a boil and beefsteaks broiling before the flames on sharp sticks reached Lockhart's flared nostrils as he lay quiet, trying not to attract further unwelcome attention. His rawhide bonds were so tight they hampered circulation and cut his flesh when he stealthily attempted to free himself.

He listened to them talking. Dogface Lucas began telling Bernie and the other stay-at-homes about what had occurred that day. The Mexican who had helped catch Lockhart had come in with the mustangs. He was proudly wearing Lockhart's fine boots.

"We chased that eyeballer to Jericho," declared Lucas, his mouth full of steak. "That golden sorrel can run like the heel flies was after him and keep it up, too. Soon as I fill that Ranger full of lead I aim to own his hoss. Never saw one as good. Remember, boys, that geldin' is mine, and I don't want him hurt."

Lockhart realized that the horse thief was talking about Hatfield and Goldy and he listened excitedly. He gathered that Lucas and the main crew had spent the whole day pursuing the officer, and was relieved as he learned they had failed to overtake him.

Around nine P. M., when a chunk of moon was peeking through the trees and the glow from the fires in the clearing was a dull-red, a sentry could be heard challenging. Lockhart hoped against hope. It might possibly be help arriving, but whoever it was he would have welcomed any diversion for he was suffering from the taut bonds, and his arms and legs aching and prickling. Besides, the outlaws had given him nothing to eat or drink.

But the Deecee rider was disappointed. Whoever had arrived proved to be friendly to the horse thieves. Half a dozen *vaqueros* strode into the encampment, led by a small, lively figure in a high-peaked sombrero, short jacket and tight pants supported by a wide sash.

Lockhart knew him—Juan Enriquez, *El Chicaro*. The bronc buster had seen him at the Deecee with Cyrus Isbell. Dogface Lucas jumped up to shake hands, greeting the Pea with due respect. He towered over the diminutive Mexican.

"See what we caught in the rat trap!" said Lucas jovially, leading Enriquez to where Lockhart lay.

In the red light *El Chicaro* stared at the trussed captive. He started. *"Bueno!* But you must not let him go, *amigo mio!* He could ruin me in Austin."

"Don't stew about that. He'll never escape."

"Si, si." He shrugged and turned to other matters. "I bring orders. *El Jefe* wishes us to join forces and strike Senor Cargill at once. Twenty more *vaqueros* from the city will be here pronto."

"Suits me," agreed Lucas. "I'm sick of Cargill. He's held us up worse than anybody. That Ranger he sent for come close to finishin' me off."

They turned away, to discuss the plan of crushing the Deecee. Bottles were being drained in the bandit strong-

hold and the burning liquor inflamed the sullen brains of the gunhands. Some of them came over and began tormenting Lockhart, poking him with sticks and spur points, laughing when he involuntarily winced in his bonds. Still he would not cry out but remained silent, teeth gritted.

A drunken Mexican staggered over and quirted the helpless rider unmercifully until Dogface Lucas bellowed at him to quit.

"Yuh want to kill the cuss?" he roared. "I may need him."

Weak and hurt, Lockhart lay on the cooling earth.

After a time Lucas and Enriquez returned and stood over Lockhart.

"We aim to give yuh a chance," growled the horse thief. "Tomorrer night we're goin' to blast Cargill out of his house. He's got no chance against us. But I don't want to lose any more men if I can help it, so you'll lead us in. Yuh can fool Cargill so we can rush the door. All yuh need do is sing out to him in the dark and throw him off guard."

"We let you ride free," promised *El Chicaro.*

"What do yuh take me for?" snapped Lockhart.

This angered Lucas. "Fetch me a brand from that fire, Pedro," he ordered a Mexican.

The smoking end of the brand glowed as Dogface shoved it against Lockhart's bronzed cheek. Spasms of pain coursed through him but he would not utter a cry.

A DIVERSION was created as more of *El Chicaro's* crew arrived to join the crowd at camp. Most of them were *vaqueros.* All about Lockhart were intent, fierce faces as he steeled himself against slow, agonizing death. Then a strident, cruelly humorous voice sang out:

"Play Dixie on his teeth, Boss! Brand him with a heart—'I love you!' "

A laugh broke from the outlaws. A bony young fellow pushed to the front, skipping about and showing off. The youth wore ragged whites and a battered straw hat, and old runover boots were on his long feet. He did a comic dance and drew more mirth, even making Dogface grin, while *El Chicaro* nodded and smiled.

"Ees Buck," said the small Mexican. "He is joker, *si!* He makes us laugh."

For a moment Lockhart forgot his forlorn plight and his pain, in his astonishment. *El Chicaro's* jester was Buck Robertson, Ranger Hatfield's youthful aide!

Buck was grimacing at him. He flitted to and fro, now and then taking a kick at Lockhart which did not hurt much since Buck took care to pull his weight back at the last moment. For a time Dogface Lucas permitted the sport, then he called for another red-hot brand and ordered Buck away.

Lockhart had thought it over. He could not stand much more of the torture and he knew they would kill him. After Dogface had burned him again, he cried:

"All right! I'll do anything yuh say!"

"That's better," snarled Lucas.

But Lockhart only pretended to acquiesce. He had determined that when they drew close enough to the Deecee he would sing out, as Lucas desired, only it would be a warning to his friends. Without doubt the attackers would kill him for it, but he would escape further beatings and if he died it would be quickly.

"Aw, shucks!" Buck was disappointed. "Make him squeal, Mr. Lucas."

"I can use him," said Dogface. "Give the fool a drink if he wants it and roll him a quirly. I'm goin' to turn in and you boys better get some sleep. We got a big time tomorrer night."

Buck went off with the others. He seemed a favorite among the *vaqueros.* His Spanish was larded with colloquial expressions amusing to them.

But the outlaws were quieting down. Figures began rolling in blankets. A cooling wind rustled the treetops and weary men who had been in the saddle since dawn settled themselves to sleep. Sentries covered the approaches.

For half an hour Lucas and *El Chicaro* sat together by a diminishing blaze, passing a bottle back and forth as they conversed in low tones. Then they also turned in.

Water and a smoke had been given Lockhart. The canteen had been held to his lips while he drank, the quirly as he puffed on it. Worn to a frazzle from what he had undergone he dropped off to sleep from sheer exhaustion.

CHAPTER XII

Ranger Strategy

FOR a moment, as Lockhart suddenly started awake, he thought he was in his bunk at the Deecee with his usual companions about him. The fires had died away and the light was faint. Then as realization of his plight struck him he felt sickened and he ached all over. His discomfort was almost unbearable.

He decided it was very late. Snores came from recumbent outlaws. He heard the soft whinny of a horse below, at the picket lines and corral.

"S-s-t!"

Lockhart jumped in his bonds. The sibilant hiss had come from just behind him, almost in his ear. A whisper followed:

"It's me—Buck! I'm cuttin' yuh free. Take it easy."

Hope surged into the Deecee rider. He could scarcely contain himself. A snake-like arm worked around the boulder, a knife in hand. The blade was as sharp as a razor and Buck began sawing at Lockhart's wrist cords, lying flat at the side of the rock and partially shadowed by it.

When Lockhart felt his hands free he tried to move them. He had to bite his lip to keep from moaning with pain. Needles and pins seemed to be jabbing his flesh.

For minutes he could only lie there, weakly flexing his hands.

Buck waited, as silent as the rock. "Can yuh get at yore ankles?" breathed the youth.

"I think so. Let's have that knife."

A couple of guards were across the camp, one slouched on a flat stone, the other leaning against a tree trunk. Both carried carbines. Carefully and slowly Lockhart turned on his side, so his back was to the sentinels. He drew his knees up and managed to get the blade between his feet. He could hardly find strength in his hands to grip the horn handle and apply enough pressure to slice the thick rawhide crossed and recrossed at his ankles. When it finally let go he went through more agony, which he suffered in silence.

"Ready?" whispered Buck. "We'll have to run. Can yuh make it?"

"How far?"

"Two hundred yards through the woods. I got hosses."

"I'll have to stand it. Wish I had some boots."

Lockhart fought to gather his remaining strength. What he had undergone had sapped his power.

One of the outlaw guards yawned, put down his rifle and rolled a quirly, lighting it with a brand from one of the low fires.

Then he picked up his carbine and came strolling straight toward Lockhart.

"The jig's up!" gasped the rider.

Plainly the sentry meant to check up on the prisoner, no doubt following orders Lucas had left for the night shift.

When the burly gunhand was halfway to the captive and it was obvious that he would discover that Lockhart's ropes had been slashed, the bronc buster jumped up and dived past the boulder. The guard saw him and threw his rifle to his shoulder.

A pistol cracked close to Lockhart. Buck had hastily fired and the outlaw's carbine whipped up, its slug shrieking into the air, as the sentry yipped and dropped his right arm which had been cut by Buck's bullet.

"Come on—run!" cried Buck, thrusting a six-shooter into Lockhart's hand.

The fleet youth led the way, taking a narrow path into the nearby woods. Now everybody in the encampment was rolling out, grabbing shotguns, carbines and Colts while Dogface Lucas and *El Chicaro* shouted commands.

The two fugitives were out of the light circle when volleys from enemy guns blindly sought them as they dodged through the trees and brush. Lockhart's bare feet were cut by sharp stones and thorns and only the fact that he was running for life itself kept him going.

A gun flamed from the right, and Lockhart got off two from his pistol to hold the sentinel over there.

"Come on—come on!" begged Buck, turning as he sped lightly along. He had arranged everything as far as possible and the winding path was clear.

THE two hundred yards seemed like so many miles, endless to the suffering Lockhart. Then suddenly, with the roaring, shooting killers driving after them, they came into a clearing and two saddled horses stood there with dropped rein. Lockhart had never before known such intense relief as he felt when he settled in the leather seat and yanked rein, turning the long-legged mustang which Buck had rustled from the outlaw stock.

The lean youth hit the hull cinched on Old Heart 7, his own chunky gray, and led the retreat. Each of the fugitives held a revolver, guiding their mounts with knees and free hand. The woods were black, the trail rough. If a horse fell it would mean the end, for after them bayed Dogface Lucas and his entire crew.

Glancing back, Lockhart saw the flaming guns spitting at them and bullets clipped the leaves. The bandits were picking up horses for the pursuit and, guessing the desperate fugitives would make for the Deecee, would shortcut accordingly.

"We ain't out of the woods yet," muttered Lockhart.

After a short run they came out on a wider trail along which Lucas had been pushing stolen animals, and swung west under a high, lopsided silver moon. . . .

In the meantime, after a strenuous day of fighting off and eluding Dogface Lucas' bandits who were out after his blood, Ranger Jim Hatfield had at last thrown them off. Now he was slowly feeling his way through the murky woods lining Walnut Creek. Mist rose off the water and from swampy areas into which the stream overflowed. Through a break in the leafy roof he could see a star-studded patch of sky dominated by a lopsided moon.

"It ain't too far now, Goldy," he murmured to his sorrel.

He was working his way back to the Deecee. Dogface Lucas and his gun hands had chased him miles off his course, staying on his trail for hours. They had run him across the Colorado, which it was possible for a horse to swim, hoping that his fine golden sorrel would break down so they could come up and kill him. Some of the mounts of his pursuers were strong, fine animals and it had required great speed and stamina for any horse to stay ahead for they had ridden in relays, two or three forging ahead to harass him, then others taking a fling at it. But eventually the horse thieves had quit, for their mustangs were lathered and winded. And still the golden gelding ran with a spring in his legs.

Lucas and his bunch had turned back north, the Ranger had noted, watching them from just out of easy range. When he was sure the outlaws were giving up, Hatfield dismounted and wiped down the sorrel. Goldy had done a noble job of carrying him out of danger. Now the mount must be attended to and rested, for the best of horses could travel just so far without a breather.

When night fell, Hatfield holed up in a grove and catnapped while Goldy grazed and recovered strength. They were south of the Colorado, with a long trip back to Cargill's confronting them, and it was not the Ranger's policy to maltreat his equine friend. Men such as Lucas and his followers would goad and quirt a

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beast to death to suit their own convenience, but the Ranger was not a man of that stripe.

As soon as Goldy had sufficiently recovered, Hatfield began the run to the Deecee. He had to travel cautiously over the rolling range, for it was possible that Lucas might have left drygulchers in ambush watching for him in the gloom. He veered northwest to avoid the direct route to the river and this, combined with the easy pace he let Goldy set for himself, delayed him.

RECROSSING the big river, Hatfield held a course for Walnut Creek and worked up the tributary toward his goal. It was two hours past midnight when he sighted a flickering light on the high ground over the creek. That would mark the Deecee.

He left the low ground and moved toward the ranch.

He was aware of a rider coming toward him and sang out.

"Deecee! I'm a friend."

The cowboy rider he saw was a mounted guard circling the buildings. A carbine *clucked* as it was hastily cocked.

"That you, Ace?" a voice called.

"No, it's Jim Hatfield! Comin' through."

Soon he was in the yard, past the sentries. A smoky lantern hung on a corral post. Vague cowboy shapes were around, marked by the ruby glow of quirlies as men inhaled.

The Ranger swung from his sweated seat. Dillard Cargill came over.

"Everybody's wide awake," remarked Hatfield. "Yuh're mighty late turnin' in or mighty early risin'."

Cargill swore. "Hair in the butter! We ain't hit the sack yet. Lockhart's missin'. He didn't come in last night. We started a hunt but dark fell and we found no sign of him. I'm scared the hoss thieves have downed him. Claire's frantic. I've had crews out all this time."

The news was distressing. Asa Lockhart was a splendid young man and his loss would be a savage blow to Claire Cargill as well as to his many friends. Fury against Cyrus Isbell, inspirer of the terrible scourge which had fallen over Austin and the surrounding range, burned in Hatfield at this latest manifestation of the man's brutal force. Lives were being blighted by Isbell's ruthless ambitions.

CHAPTER XIII

Fury

GRATEFULLY Hatfield drank hot coffee and ate a plate of warm food which Mrs. Cargill served him. It went well with the hungry officer. Claire was in her room, stricken by what had occurred. She came out for a few minutes and Hatfield had a glimpse of her pale face. Her eyes showed that she had been weeping.

When he had finished eating, Hatfield rolled a smoke and spoke further with Cargill. He learned that Lockhart had insisted on going out to work the previous morning though he had promised he would not ride far.

"We got to keep operatin'," growled Cargill defensively. "I've ordered the boys not to stray way off."

Hatfield nodded. He understood the necessities of ranch life. Animals had to be tended, no matter what happened, and the mechanics of running a ranch kept going or the Deecee would break down.

He had unsaddled Goldy and turned him into a grassy corral behind the stable. Cargill told him to help himself to a horse, and he picked a strong-looking mustang and roped it from the ranch stock, cinching on his own saddle. He rode off northeast, the direction in which Lockhart had gone when last seen.

An hour had passed since his arrival at the Cargill ranch. Eastward, past Mount Bonnell and Austin, just the faintest streak of light was touching the lower sky, the promise of the new dawn. Half an hour later the world had imperceptibly grown gray and he could see farther and farther ahead, make out more and more details.

Under him the black mustang shivered nervously, ears laid back. He was what was termed "broken," although only a first-class rider could stay on him.

"What is it, boy?" asked the Ranger. But the black was not in communion with

him as was Goldy.

Hatfield slowed a bit and pulled his carbine from the socket under his leg. This alarmed the black who danced and began to buck. The day was coming up although the sun's redness was not yet visible.

Then the distant crack of an exploding gun warned the Ranger. It came from the east and he thought slightly to the south of where he was. He held the black with pressured knees, with taut rein in his left hand, gripping the carbine in his right as he waited for whatever was approaching.

The firing increased until it became loud, ragged volleys. He could identify the voices of Colts and of light rifles of the type favored for shooting from horseback. Suddenly two racing mustangs broke over a rise and tore along a course which if held would bring them a few hundred yards below where Hatfield had taken a stand.

He swung the shivering black and urged him forward. He peered at the figures low over their animals as they fought for every ounce of speed.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" muttered the Ranger. "That's Buck on Old Heart Seven. And could that other hombre be Lockhart?"

He thought it must be, though the horse was unfamiliar. Lockhart was beyond Buck, and had turned to look back.

Surging over the crest on their trail and shooting at the fugitives came more and more hard-riding men. While the Ranger could not make out features at the distance he guessed they were members of Dogface Lucas' band. Some of them were recognizable, for they had been in the crew which had chased Hatfield himself. A number of *vaqueros* were in front.

The earth began shaking with the beating, shod hoofs. The riders were letting go with pistols and carbines, their spurs dug in, their quirts busy. Hatfield had the black at full run and he shouted to Buck who looked his way and kept going as the Ranger waved them on. The officer got off three shots from his carbine but the black under him would not stand for this, being untrained in battle. He began to buck and Hatfield thrust the rifle back in the boot and pulled a Colt. He could control his mount with one hand while he fired with the other.

HE HIT a *vaquero* who was leading the pursuit. The Mexican flew from his saddle and rolled over and over before bringing up short against a jutting rock where he lay curved around it. Colt blasting, Hatfield snarlingly attacked as the van rolled up—half a dozen outlaws on superior mounts who had threatened to overtake Buck and his companion.

To protect themselves they had to turn on him and this permitted Buck and Lockhart to gain a few jumps. Hatfield was sure now that it was the bronc buster. Somehow Buck Robertson had found him, perhaps helped him out of trouble.

Bunches of the horse thief band drove closer and the Ranger retreated, fighting them all the way as he made for the Deecee. He saw Dogface Lucas among his men and a number of other outlaws he had previously encountered. But there were more than ever, about a third of them *vaqueros*.

Dillard Cargill and his cowboys, hearing the approaching commotion, were running to defense posts, the rancher shouting orders as they made ready for the clash. Buck and Lockhart reached the yard and threw themselves from their mustangs. Hatfield was almost there when the black gave a convulsive leap into the air, shuddering from stem to stern. The Ranger just managed to kick his toes free of the tapped stirrups, as the Deecee horse crashed hard.

Hatfield landed running, gun in hand. He covered the remaining distance at a dash, high-heeled boots and all. Cargill and his aides had opened up and their fire forced Lucas and his outlaws to swerve.

Bullets kicked up dust around the running Ranger. His breath was coming in gasps as he reached a small shed and threw himself down behind it, training his Colt on the foe.

Infuriated at the loss of Lockhart and Buck, Dogface Lucas roared orders and his men charged. It was four to one but the light was good and the Deecee had cover, firing from windows or from behind structures. Stinging lead cut up the leading attackers and a couple of

mustangs were hit and fell, their riders hastily running to the rear. Wounded bandits screeched and the banging guns echoed across the creek valley.

A few drove up to the yard but the Deecee quickly blasted them back. Hatfield's heavy pistols ripped the dashing bandits. Within minutes Lucas' men broke off the frontal assault, for they knew they were at a disadvantage against hidden sharpshooters. They circled, baying like hounds, whooping it up and futilely letting fly with lead which slapped into the building walls or ricocheted from the earth around the ranch.

Lucas drew off and threw a circle around the Deecee. His men dismounted and dropped their reins. They rolled smokes and watched their quarry, gesturing challenges. As the worst of the fray died off, Hatfield jumped up and ran for the kitchen door. Lucas tried for the Ranger with a rifle but Hatfield skipped safely inside.

Cargill was in there, and so was Buck Robertson, grinning at his tall comrade. In a chair, head sunk in sheer exhaustion, with Claire hovering anxiously beside him, sat Ace Lockhart.

"Buck!" cried Hatfield. "How did you get into this shindig?"

"I was workin' at *El Chicaro's,* Jim," Buck explained. "He collected a bunch of fightin' *vaqueros* and let me go along when I begged him. Dogged if I didn't bump into Ace at their field camp, down behind that ridge where we caught Lucas. They had Lockhart and were torturin' him."

Wearily Lockhart raised his head. Claire had brought him a drink, but his hand trembled as he tried to raise it to his swollen lips. Hatfield stared curiously at the change in the handsome flash rider. Lockhart's good looks had been temporarily wrecked. His face was a mess of scratches and burns, his eyes nearly shut from puffed flesh. On his arms were more cuts and bruises. His crisp chestnut hair was matted with dirt and dried blood, his clothes were ripped, and dirty with sticky clay.

After he had taken a drink, assisted by Claire's gentle touch, Lockhart whispered hoarsely:

"The boy saved my life."

"Shucks—it was nothin'," said Buck, embarrassed by all the attention directed his way. "They planned to hit here in full force tonight. Enriquez's gunhands were to join with Lucas and help blast you out, Mr. Cargill. I aimed to warn yuh, but I had to try and help Ace. We just did make it. They cut us off for a while and drove us south, but we managed to get around before they could close in on us."

JIM HATFIELD heard the plans of the outlaws as Buck described his adventures among *El Chicaro's* followers, and in the outlaw hideout.

"Yore escape has ruined any s'prise Lucas hoped for." The Ranger nodded. "Yuh've done a real job, Buck. I'm shore proud of yuh."

The horse thief crew showed no signs of charging them in the daylight. The sun was reddening the eastern sky. Food was in order. Cargill helped Lockhart to a cot in a side room while outside alert cowboys watched the circle of killers drawn about the Deecee.

All through the morning and the heat of noon, Dogface Lucas squatted out there, holding the Deecee on the defensive. But the truce was a boon to Hatfield who needed sleep. He turned in and rested through the warm afternoon.

As evening approached, the Ranger consulted with Dillard Cargill.

"I believe Lucas aims to try after dark, Cargill. From what Buck says they may have some home-made powder bombs to throw in. We better get some bull's-eye lanterns filled and ready so we can focus on any cusses creepin' up in the night. Put a couple of men in that far shed with a good light."

His orders were carried out, and dispositions were made for the expected attack. Cowboys took turns standing watch while other reliefs snatched naps or ate. The Deecee was on a war footing.

When dark fell on the land, Hatfield moved to the shed behind which he had taken shelter when he had rushed in ahead of Lucas. He listened for sounds of the enemy before he started to crawl out toward the dead black mustang not far away. Two Deecee waddies waited at the shed, ready to assist him if need be.

He wanted his saddle which was

cinched to the black. Reaching the black's body, he undid the buckles and managed to pull the straps from under the heavy animal. He shouldered the saddle and loped back to the shed without being fired on.

An ominous silence held outside and the defenders could not see the foe now.

"Mebbe they went home to mother," said a cowboy hopefully.

"I don't think so," replied the Ranger. "I reckon they're gettin' ready for a rush. Keep a sharp eye peeled."

He was somewhat uneasy at being penned in at the Deecee. With Isbell operating in Austin, Hatfield wanted to get back there and go to work at the difficult job of smashing the contractor. Dogface and *El Chicaro,* he felt certain, were only agents of Isbell, and so was the pink-faced garroter who carried out reprisals against those who dared defy the beefy boss.

"And if I can get to town," he thought, "I can rustle up some help to send here."

It was about ten o'clock when the two Deecee waddies at the outlying shack bellowed an alarm and began shooting. Hatfield sprang to the kitchen door. The bull's-eyes stab from the shed picked out a snaky figure flattened on the ground not far from the dead black horse. In front of Lucas' emissary stood a large can which he had been pushing before him as he crept toward the house.

The cowboys were going for him with their carbines. Hastily the attacker struck a match and touched it to a short fuse sticking from the can. He jumped up and hurled this crude grenade, but a slug slashed his shoulder, half whirling him around. The container fell short, and as the wounded outlaw ran back, holding his injured arm, the bomb exploded with a shattering roar. Dirt and pebbles rained down, but the cowboys were behind the shack and were not hurt.

CHAPTER XIV

Siege

QUICKLY warnings were called from around the ranch. The sounds of running men, the flashes of weapons, told that the encircling horse thieves were coming in a rush. Two more can grenades were tossed, but they were short, as sweeping beams of lanterns exposed the enemy and the defenders hurriedly cut them with lead.

Everybody was on deck and as heavy rifles came into play, spurting from loopholes and windows, the outlaws were met with a hot reception. Dogface Lucas hastily changed his mind as his men faltered. The cost was too high and the charge was called off.

The bombs had done no harm to the house.

After another hour had passed and all seemed quiet, Hatfield spoke with Dillard Cargill.

"I'm goin' through, suh," he said. "I'll head for Austin and send out what men I can muster. You stick on guard."

He softly whistled up Goldy and led him to the stable to be saddled. The Ranger would be riding alone, for Buck would remain to help at the Deecee. Ready for the dash, Hatfield rode from the barn, spurting rapidly toward the dark woods lining Walnut Creek.

A hundred yards out a man sprang up, challenging him. Hatfield's pistol roared. He was traveling at full gallop and a ball from the rustler's flaming gun whistled a foot over his lowered head. More of Dogface's killers opened up from the sides but, as the Ranger had guessed, most of them had been lounging around, taking it easy and resting. A few had been walking guard tour. By the time they could concentrate on the point the officer was in the brush.

He splashed across Walnut Creek, hurrying off. Once clear he turned and started a wide sweep around the Deecee to hit the Austin pike.

After a hard ride he neared Mount Bonnell. The sorrel sniffed and rippled his hide, giving him a warning. The Ranger slowed, head cocked to the easterly breeze. A stone clacked under a shod hoof and as he made the next turn he saw several heads topped by peaked sombreros against the light of the sky. The city's glow was beyond.

The riders on the highway blocked him. He stayed behind them for a mile. They trotted their horses briskly along and as

they passed an oil lamp illuminating a street corner on the west side of town, he was able to identify the small figure of *El Chicaro,* among half a dozen armed *vaqueros.*

"Figgered so!" he murmured.

This was too good a chance to miss. He lay back, trailing cautiously. *El Chicaro* slanted left, passing Isbell's great yards, dark in the night. Saloons and honkytonks were going full blast in the downtown quarters and here and there lights showed in a home. But for the most part Austin slept.

Hardly a mile from his office stood Isbell's mansion, set in landscaped grounds. It was late, but Enriquez and his men dismounted under a carriage porch and the Pea went to ring the bell while his gunslingers rolled quirlies and smoked as they waited outside.

A small night lamp burned in the front hall and by its light the Ranger could see that soon *El Chicaro* was admitted. Hatfield moved around to the rear, dropped rein under a large oak tree and slipped through a service gate. He made good use of the ornamental shrubbery as he flitted across the lawn.

Windows in a downstairs room toward the back of the mansion glowed yellow and a huge black shadow fell across a curtain as a man entered with a taper. A lamp was lighted, and Hatfield was certain that Enriquez and probably Isbell would be in there.

The *vaqueros* were around the corner of the house. Hatfield drew in and crouched under an open window. He had seen the beefy Isbell, in a dressing gown, sitting in a leather armchair, with *El Chicaro* talking excitedly as he reported.

The beefy chief darkly glowered as Juan Enriquez recounted the story of Asa Lockhart's capture and subsequent escape, of the chase, and of how Dogface Lucas had lost the element of surprise in his latest grand attack on the Deecee Ranch. The Pea took care not to lay any blame on himself.

"That Ranger, the big hombre," cried *El Chicaro,* shrugging. "He was there. He fought us like *el tigre, si.*"

"Hatfield again," snapped Isbell. He took a piece of candy from a jar and began chewing it, scowling as he considered the information brought him. "He didn't go far. He's disobeyed orders. I'll have his hide for that, and old McDowell's, too. I'll break 'em the way you crack a dry stick!"

ISBELL'S hairy fat hands clenched. He was furiously angry, and *El Chicaro* gulped and quailed.

"I did my best, senor."

"Huh. It seems to me that by now Lucas and that bunch of no-good rum guzzlers I'm paying could have disposed of a few measly cow nurses! I expected to be working the Deecee and Labry's, too, by this time. I need those materials, and they're close at hand. I can't ship enough to satisfy all these builders. My contracts call for quick delivery, too. I'll lose a fortune and look like a fool with my yards empty! By the way, I hold the Lewis tract. You know I had an option. With the help of a note I fixed up I was able to buy the entire property from his widow. Vesper at least can deliver the goods. Wish I could say the same for Dogface Lucas."

"*Bueno, bueno,*" applauded Enriquez. He poured himself a drink from a crystal decanter. "*Si,* the Coralsnake is a great hombre." The Pea was an educated man and spoke with little accent.

Isbell talked freely with his jackal. Most men needed a confidant, someone to admire their feats. Enriquez fitted this rôle. Isbell's outlawry had to be concealed from honest folk, and only with his most trusted aides could he relax and boast of his evil successes.

They were silent for a while as *El Chicaro* sipped his whisky, awaiting his chief's decision. At last Isbell again spoke.

"Hatfield's the most annoying fly in our ointment, Juan," he said. "Fortunately I've already taken steps to neutralize anything he can do. McDowell has the Governor's and AG's ear but I'm exerting pressure. I can force Hatfield to quit now, thanks to Coralsnake. You know I never strike until I have all the facts in my possession. Hatfield is friendly with a girl named Robertson in the city. We hold her. The Ranger won't dare make another move against me when he learns this."

Coldness seized the tall officer's heart.

From what Isbell had just said, the enemy must have seized Anita!

"She has a young brother," continued Isbell. "So far Vesper hasn't been able to locate him. He wasn't at home last night when Coralsnake visited their cottage. It's said this lad sometimes assists Hatfield. He's tall and bony, with tow hair. Watch out for him. He rides a chunky gray branded with a Heart Seven."

El Chicaro choked on his liquor and rose galvanically from his chair.

"Buck!" he sputtered. "I savvy!"

Isbell's bushy brows raised as he sourly heard the confession Enriquez made of having been taken in by the Ranger's aide, that it was thanks to this that Lockhart had escaped and the grand assault on the Deecee had fizzled.

"Very pretty," snapped Isbell. "I've had all I can stand of Hatfield and his crew. Vesper fought him at Cos Collins' place. I'll order Coralsnake to concentrate now on the Ranger."

The pink-faced garroter and knife artist, the killer he had been seeking, must be "Coralsnake" Vesper, Isbell's secret agent in Austin. Rage flushed through Hatfield as he realized that Isbell had sent this horrible outlaw to capture Anita. It was all he could do to restrain himself, hold himself back from rushing in and attacking Isbell, choking from the beefy chief the information as to the Coralsnake's hideout.

But he knew that would be too much of a chance to take. Isbell would have armed helpers near and the *vaqueros* were within call. If they managed to kill or capture the tall officer then they would triumph.

"I am worn to a frazzle," announced *El Chicaro*. "I go to my compound to sleep. In the morning we strike. Right now the Ranger is pinned at Cargill's."

Isbell nodded. He heaved himself up and blew out the lamp, seeing Enriquez to the door with the candle in its long silver stick. The Pea rode off with his *vaqueros* while Hatfield lurked nearby, hoping Isbell might dress and hurry to contact Coralsnake Vesper, lead him to the garroter.

Instead, the faint, moving beam of the taper showed that Isbell was going upstairs. It paused for a few seconds in a front room, and then the windows were darkened. The Ranger could only conclude that Isbell had returned to bed.

HE SQUATTED in the shadow, weighing the chances of capturing Isbell in his home, perhaps breaking him by threats. But Isbell was a determined person. He had everything to lose by surrender, nothing to gain. He would know that the Ranger would not kill him or hurt him much while Anita was in the hands of the Coralsnake, the Deecee under siege, and all depending on Hatfield for relief.

Picking up the golden sorrel, the troubled Ranger hurried east on a winding road which would take him to Captain McDowell's house. He cut through the street on which the Robertson home stood. It was dark and no answer came to his knocks. Anita was gone, as he had learned at Isbell's.

McDowell roused as the tall Ranger rapped with his gun butt on the captain's door. Quickly the old fire-eater pulled on his clothes, strapped his gunbelts around his waist and saddled a horse. As they rode to the center of the city, throbbing with its lurid night life, Hatfield informed his chief of all that occurred. McDowell's angry curses heated the air.

"So the pink-faced cuss is Coralsnake Vesper. First we got to save the little lady, Hatfield."

"Yes suh, that's Number One. Can yuh start some men out to gun Dogface Lucas away from the Deecee? That will leave me free to hunt Anita."

McDowell nodded as he heard the plans. Hatfield was driven by dread and the need of haste. He must locate Coralsnake Vesper without delay and free Anita. Somewhere in the teeming capital the killer lurked in his den.

CHAPTER XV

Search

PAPA FRANCISCO rubbed the sleep from his eyes while he volubly greeted the Ranger. A candle guttered

on the kitchen table and Mama soon appeared, excited by the late call, but always happy to see her *amigo.* She embraced Hatfield and pushed him to a chair, insisting that he must eat.

The two men smoked as she hurried to prepare food.

"Remember the hombre with the pink face, Francisco?" asked the Ranger.

"*Si, si!* Ze Coralsnake. I savvy! After you came I ask everybody. Ees *muy malo!*" Francisco zipped a finger around his neck to simulate a throttling, and shook his grizzled head.

Hope sprang in Hatfield's being. "He's in the quarter?"

"*Si!* At Paruci's."

"I know the place," said the Ranger. "Ain't far from *El Chicaro's.* There's a bar in front and they sell Mexican food."

He rose, girding up his heavy cartridge belts. He was eager to tangle with Isbell's dreaded avenger, Coralsnake Vesper. That must be the next step. He had considered invading *El Chicaro's* compound and trying to capture the Pea on the theory that by putting pressure on Enriquez he might locate the strangler. But if any slip occurred it would warn Isbell, and if Anita was not found promptly she might never again be found. And for the sake of Isbell's Austin victims, the Coralsnake must be scotched.

"Wait!" cried Papa. "You cannot go to Paruci's! Eef an hombre like you walk een, everybody runs or shoots!"

"I got to trap this Coralsnake, no matter what." Hatfield told them then of the beautiful young senorita who had been snatched by the pink-faced garroter. Both his friends clucked with dismayed sympathy.

Mama poured black coffee and placed fried cakes before him.

"Must eat, must eat," she insisted.

"*Si.*" Papa nodded. "I theenck!"

He put his head in his hands. Reluctantly Hatfield resumed his chair, and consumed the appetizing cakes and fragrant coffee.

Francisco jumped up. "I have eet." He turned to the wall where clothing hung on wooden pegs. He took down a long black Mexican cape, a peaked sombrero. "You wear these. Hold ze serape to your eyes when we go een. Si, I go along!"

"Papa!" wailed his wife. "Zey keel you!"

Francisco drew himself up, inflating his chest. He strapped on a brass-studded belt supporting a knife in a carved sheath and a holster. From a drawer he brought forth an ancient horse pistol and dramatically loaded it.

"Yuh got an idea!" said the Ranger.

He hung the serape about his long body and strapped the sombrero low over his eyes. A few smudges from the stove blacking on his heavily bronzed cheeks satisfied the critical eye of Francisco.

"I do ze talk, savvy?" he warned. "Say nozzing."

Hatfield helped him saddle a mule and they rode off through the twisting, narrow byways of the Mexican quarter. Paruci's place was down near the river, where spring floods sometimes washed into the dwellings. Little light showed in the place, to be seen from the dirt road. The cantina was of one story, several rickety structures of adobe or scrap lumber loosely hooked together.

"Een back are rooms," whispered Francisco as they approached the crooked door. It was closed and a faint slit of yellow light showed under its base.

They heard the low strains of a guitar as someone played a soft Spanish love song. Papa knocked and someone challenged through the door in Spanish. Francisco gave a voluble explanation and the bolt was pulled. A dark-faced Mexican with a dirty apron over his silk shirt and velvet pants let them in.

Suspicious eyes studied them and a silence came upon the gathering. Hatfield, slumped down, kept the edge of the blanket cloak to his nostrils. Francisco talked in a swift, loud way. He knew the proprietor, who sat behind the bar at the right. There were tables on a sanded floor, and benches. Mexicans in various stages of drunkenness slouched about. They were armed riffraff, dangerous and alert. The Ranger recognized two *vaqueros* he had observed at *El Chicaro's* compound.

HE HUNG over the bar at Francisco's side, saying not a word but moodily drinking *tequila* as Francisco explained about his "nephew" to Paruci. It was hinted that the hulking nephew was only

safe traveling after dark. But just the same he was a favorite of Papa's.

Soon the guitar player picked up his melody, and the patrons relaxed, resuming their drinks or low chatting. Some played dice or cards and a couple bickered over the score.

Papa claimed they were starving. Paruci shrugged toward the red curtains separating the bar from the rear. They went through them and a Mexican woman came to take their food order. The odors of stale liquor and foods, of dankness and unwashed humanity, of old clothes, permeated the entire establishment.

Hatfield could see through a low corridor into the kitchen where smoke rose from frying meat. There was nobody else in the dining room. On both sides of the open hall were closed doors.

"Which one?" he wondered, girding himself for battle.

Was Coralsnake Vesper behind one of the doors? And could Anita be somewhere in the musty recesses of the building?

Suddenly a bolt rattled from the left. The door was flung open and a strange apparition stepped into the dining room. A tall and bony figure in dirty, stained cotton trousers that had once been white, and a ragged shirt, walked unsteadily across the creaking floor.

A gun and knife were thrust into his sash but he was not a Mexican although he wore peon garb. His face was an unwholesome pink, his deep-sunken black eyes with red rims smoldered with ironic hatred. His thin hair stuck to his long head.

"Maria—Maria!" he shouted angrily.

It was the Coralsnake; no doubt of that. Francisco tensed and his liquid eyes expressively begged Hatfield to remain silent, not to move. Vesper had stopped short as he spied them in the corner. He glared and cursed hotly.

"What yuh doin' in here?" he snarled.

Hatfield made ready. But Maria hurried in from the kitchen.

"Senor Vespair! Please, zey are *amigos.* Wat ees?"

Coralsnake Vesper swore at her, his thin lips writhing as she drew his attention from the guests. He was steeped in liquor but wanted more.

"*Tequila!*—pronto," he ordered, and hurled money at Paruci's wife.

She deftly caught the bills, greed shining in her eyes. Tough and nasty as he was, Vesper paid handsomely for service.

"*Graçias,*" she said. "Go back. I breeng."

Coralsnake glowered at the two men who were eating. But as they failed to turn a hair or take the slightest note of him he walked unsteadily back the way he had come. He left the door ajar, for Maria had gone into the bar to fetch him a bottle.

The Ranger figured this was his chance. He rose and glided into the inky hall through which Vesper had disappeared. Francisco watched with bated breath, a brown hand stealing to the knife under his cape.

A dim light shaft was at the rear. Hatfield hurried to it on tiptoe but the uneven flooring creaked under his weight. It was impossible to move without being overheard in such a spot, but he hoped Vesper would think it was Maria bringing the *tequila.*

Perhaps animal instinct had warned Vesper or it might have been the wariness which was developed by some hunted outlaws. But the Coralsnake was waiting for him just inside the open doorway to his den, a noisome cubicle with a blackened window, and with blankets and dirty belongings scattered around the floor.

As the tall Ranger swung left he found himself eye to eye with the awful garroter. Vesper held a stag-handled knife with a twelve-inch blade in his right hand, his thumb along the flat of the sheening steel.

CORALSNAKE laughed and it was worse than his snarling, ill-humored railing. He was pleased with his own acumen in catching the man in the serape this way.

"Yuh Mexican swine, robber dog! I'll carve out yore insides and throw 'em to the fish! Thought yuh could take me, huh!"

The quarters were too close for a draw, but Hatfield's hand flashed up as the darting metal fang of the Coralsnake stabbed at him.

The Ranger's left forearm deflected the

point. The razor blade cut through his sleeve into the flesh but Hatfield's lightning reflexes had saved him from a serious wound, perhaps a mortal one.

The die was cast as he was forced to close with the lithe Vesper, slipping a steel grip on the man's bony wrist. Hate burned in Coralsnake's fuming eyes and his pink face was contorted with frenzy. But Vesper was the most agile and skilled of opponents and undoubtedly trained in all the tricks of gouge-and-bite wrestling. Instead of straining against the Ranger's hold which would have cracked his arm, Coralsnake threw himself in under Hatfield's armpit and forced the officer to release him.

CHAPTER XVI

Struggle

VESPER plunged against the wall, slid to his knees and came up. Hatfield straightened as he whirled. His sombrero crown brushed the doorway frame and his hat was knocked off, exposing his black hair and rugged face, for the blanket cloak had swished askew in the violent motions of the hand-to-hand struggle.

"Ranger!" snarled Coralsnake. Vesper recognized him, and realized his error in having taken the disguised officer for an ordinary Mexican robber.

"Throw down, Vesper!"

Even the worst of lawbreakers must be given a chance to surrender. That was Ranger code.

But his slim hand, flashing to his Colt, snagged in the folds of the serape.

Maria, coming with the bottle of *tequila,* had given a squeal when she heard the noises of the fight and spied the shadowy figures down the hall. Paruci and others from the bar were running to the rear.

"Hold or I fire!" Papa Francisco's voice rang out.

He was down the hall, his horse pistol raised and cocked, keeping off Paruci.

Coralsnake was crouched. He flipped the knife at Hatfield's eyes, at a distance of only three feet. The Ranger threw himself back and the weapon slipped off his set jaw and only scratched his chin. But it offered Vesper the breath he was after. From a shoulder holster under his torn cotton shirt he whipped out a six-shooter.

Hatfield kicked at him, the pointed toe of his boot catching Coralsnake in the throat, snapping his head back. Vesper's gun roared in the confined space, echoing through the hall. The ball passed six inches from the Ranger's body and plugged into the wall. Before Vesper could fully recover from the blow, Hatfield threw himself upon the man, slashing with his Colt barrel.

His left hand closed on Vesper's scrawny throat, his weight pinning Coralsnake in the angle formed by the wall and floor. He wanted to capture the dangerous garroter alive, if possible, for Anita's fate might depend on what Vesper could or would confess.

Hatfield was much aware of the fact that his antagonist was still holding a revolver. He kept a shoulder against Vesper's right biceps, savaging the fellow's arm against the partition. He hoped to throttle the Coralsnake to insensibility and take him. But the blood ran from the Ranger's slashed forearm and perhaps the shocked muscles prevented his grip on Vesper's throat from taking quick effect.

From the corner of his eye Hatfield caught the glint of that slowly turning blue-steel barrel. Vesper was as tense as stretched hide under him, straining to get the gun muzzle around and blow off Hatfield's head.

If he let go Coralsnake would certainly get off his shot as he was released, for he was still panting and filled with fight. He slashed at Vesper but knew it was fruitless. He had to shoot and quickly.

The Ranger's bullet drove into the Coralsnake. It was just in time. Vesper's reflex action was so fast that he squeezed trigger even as he was dying. The bullet missed only by a shade.

Gasping for air the wounded officer made sure Vesper was dead. The man's arm had fallen, the revolver hitting the splintered floor with a sharp crack. Hatfield seized the gun and, with his own Colt cocked and raised, sprang back, still covering the Coralsnake.

The silence was startling as the Ranger leaned against the rickety wall, pulling himself together. Francisco was holding the narrow entry into the gloomy corridor.

"*Bueno,* Papa," called Hatfield. "*Está muerto!*"

At the mention of death, Paruci swung on those who still remained in the dining room.

"Get out!" he ordered harshly, shooing them off with his arms the way he might scatter chickens.

Few of the Mexicans had any desire to remain. A killing might mean implication in the matter and if city marshals should appear, they would be arrested. They hurried off.

A COUPLE of *El Chícaro's vaqueros* had been in the saloon. They might carry the news of the row at Paruci's although it was doubtful if they had been able to identify either the Ranger or Vesper, in the dim hall.

Hatfield would not take his eye off the bony form doubled against the baseboard. Francisco backed to him, the horse pistol still up as Paruci slowly came through the far doorway.

"*Amigos!*" called the proprietor. "What ees?"

Papa was staring at the Coralsnake. Vesper twitched. "Ze serpent he do not die till after sundown!" muttered Francisco.

A faint grayness showed where grime had been rubbed off Vesper's little window. The new day was stealing upon Austin.

"Wait — wait!" begged Paruci. "You have keel heem, si? *Bueno,* fine. What do I care? He was a pest, always for ze fight. Good money, *si,* but dangerous. I dump heem in ze rivaire, just don't tell ze poleese."

"He try to keel my *amigo,*" growled Papa.

Hatfield pulled the cape into position and he set the sombrero on his head.

"Where's the senorita?" he demanded.

Paruci stared. "What? What you mean?"

"Where's the senorita with the golden hair and brown eyes?"

"Oh. How should I savvy?"

Hatfield took a step at him, the Colt hammer back under his thumb.

"Tell him," ordered Maria quickly. "I show you, beeg senor!"

Paruci scowled, but did not try to prevent her from unlocking the back door. Hatfield followed across a cobbled patio with the building on three sides and a low adobe wall separating the yard from the shining Colorado. At a dilapidated shed Maria knocked till a shrill female voice answered in Spanish. "Who is?"

"Mama. Open up, Conchita." To the Ranger she explained, "Your friend she ees not hurt."

A bolt rattled and a Mexican girl peeked out.

"Jim! Here I am," Anita called from the dark interior.

Intense relief flooded Hatfield as he found she was not injured. The Coralsnake had seized her at her home after nightfall, had blindfolded her and brought her in a closed carriage to Paruci's where she had been held in the custody of the Mexican women. Anita had been frightened but she was brave, and had kept herself in hand despite the strain.

Hatfield spoke with Paruci, who was sullen and angry at the invasion.

"Keep yore trap shut, Paruci," he ordered. "If yuh help *El Chícaro* and others like him again I'll come here and shove you and yore whole shebang into the river. Yuh'll answer for it in case Francisco is hurt, savvy?"

"I savvy." Paruci's snapping eyes quailed before the Ranger's hard stare.

"Behave yoreself and I won't bother yuh," promised the tall officer.

"And ze Coralsnake?" whispered Paruci. "I throw heem in ze water, *si*?" He was eager to rid himself of the evidence and was not yet aware that his powerful visitor was a Texas Ranger.

"No. Wrap him in a blanket and leave him in this room. I'll send for the body. If yuh obey, nothin' will happen to yuh."

He was driven by the need of haste. He must strike quickly and unerringly to best Cy Isbell. The first step had been taken. He had found Anita, and Isbell no longer held that club over them.

In the gloomy grayness Hatfield helped Anita up and mounted the golden sorrel. The girl held to him as they started off, with Francisco following on his mule.

When Francisco dismounted in the

yard, Mama sobbed with relief.

"Yuh done noble work, Papa," complimented the Ranger. "If yuh're bothered just let me know. *Graçias.*"

"*Si, si!*" Papa grinned.

Hatfield retrieved his Stetson. "I'll borrer the serape and sombrero for a while longer," he told his Mexican friends.

When Goldy stopped at headquarters, carrying the tall man and the pretty young woman, McDowell hurried out. He knew Anita well and greeted her joyfully.

"I sent six recruits and what deputy marshals they could scrape up out to the Deecee," he told Hatfield. "By now they must be there."

QUARTERS were found nearby for Anita with an Austin housewife whose husband was a friend of McDowell's. She would be safely hidden there from Isbell.

Hatfield cleansed and bandaged the knife cuts. They stung, but were superficial wounds.

"What next?" asked McDowell.

"I'm after *El Chicaro,* suh. Peewee is Isbell's main helper in town. If I can capture Enriquez it will stampede his chief."

"Yuh ridin' to that compound?" asked the Ranger chief. "They'll rip yuh to shreds. I'm goin' along. Wait till I saddle a bronc."

This highly satisfied McDowell. Charging an enemy strong point with the odds against him was just the sort of action he craved.

Hatfield repaired his makeup, keeping on the serape and peaked sombrero. He checked his weapons while McDowell cinched up. A man was to stay at headquarters, a clerk who must hold the fort.

In the rising light Hatfield and his captain hurried through the deserted streets. Soon the Mexican quarter would stir with life, for the inhabitants were early out of bed. The Ranger paused at the turn, looking down at the silent, walled compound. There were horses and mules, cattle and jacks in the pens, but the men who were in charge of the place were asleep or inside.

"Lie back here, cap'n," Hatfield said to McDowell. "I'll go in and try for Enriquez. I figger he's home."

"Yuh savvy which buildin'?"

"No. But I'll soon find out if he's around."

McDowell waited by the corner of the adobe hovel. The tall Ranger, hunched over the golden sorrel, moved down the rutted hill, slid from his saddle and vaulted the low fence.

CHAPTER XVII

El Chicaro

ONLY a few yards from a wooden gate a beaten path led to a thatch-roofed adobe which looked as though it might be used for living quarters. There were long sheds and other buildings inside the compound. Hatfield saw all this swiftly as he jumped the barrier.

A mangy hound rose and began barking at him. This brought other dogs which joined in the sport, yapping and darting at his legs.

In his Mexican disguise Hatfield was a tough-looking character. He had blacked his face almost completely and with the sombrero pulled low, a taut chinstrap, and his broad shoulders hunched under the cape, it was difficult to recognize the usually spick-and-span officer.

Now the light was good. A peon in cotton pants and a frayed shirt, his splayed feet bare, hastened from the hut. In his sash rode a revolver and he carried a long knife in a sheath.

"Hey there, who are you?" he demanded. He fell back, and a couple more peons showed in the doorway.

Hatfield answered in the vernacular, his voice high-pitched with urgency.

"Senor Isbell sent me. Pronto, where's *El Chicaro?*"

His excitement communicated itself to the watchman who swore at the dogs and beat them off with his straw hat as he started across the compound. Hatfield was at his bare heels. He was taking a long chance here at the enemy nest but the odds were not as long as usual for he knew that Enriquez had sent a score or more of his best fighters to support Dogface Lucas for the attack on the Deecee.

A couple of *El Chicaro's* Austin con-

tingent had been at Paruci's and had seen him in the Mexican outfit. He was watching carefully for these men, but since they had been out so late they probably were sleeping off the liquor they had imbibed in the waterfront dive.

The peon leading him was none too bright and not a fighting type. He was a lowly herder and doing guard duty in the emergency. He stopped at an adobe behind one of the long sheds.

"Wait," he ordered. "I tell *el jefe.*"

Hatfield glanced over his shoulder. The others were staring after him but since his guide had accepted the visitor they made no hostile moves. The Mexican lifted the wooden latch of the shack door and went in. Hatfield pushed in right behind him.

"Stop, hombre! I said to wait!"

From a bunk across the narrow room Juan Enriquez started awake and sat up, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"What is it, Pedro?"

Pedro swore, as he looked up into the dark face of the hulking fellow who had disobeyed and trailed him.

"Senor *El Chicaro!* He says Senor Isbell sent him. I told him to wait."

From the bunk frame depended a studded cartridge belt, the butt of a fancy revolver protruding from the holster. Shaky and filled with nervous forebodings, *El Chicaro* was alarmed at the approach of the supposed messenger. His small hand flicked toward his pistol.

But Hatfield was faster.

"Enjoy a snooze, hombre," he advised Pedro, who blocked his path. He hit the guard, knocking him out of the way. The finish of his lunge brought him upon the Pea, who had drawn the gun and was trying to cock it and aim.

Hatfield's steel fingers vised on the cylinder and deflected the muzzle. He tore the weapon from *El Chicaro* and hurled it into a far corner. Enriquez screamed as the mighty Ranger picked him up. So light was the man that he scarcely hampered Hatfield's movements. Hatfield tucked him under one arm and held his free hand over the Pea's mouth to stifle further cries.

The dazed Pedro was grunting as he pulled himself together on the dirt floor. The Ranger burst from the adobe. *El Chicaro's* yelp had been heard. The alarm was sounding and more men burst from sleeping places. Among them were the *vaqueros* Hatfield had seen drinking at Paruci's. These pointed at him and sang out in Spanish.

But now this made no difference, for peons armed with machetes, knives and guns were converging on the running officer. There was no longer any purpose in gagging *El Chicaro.* Gripping the squirming, screeching Enriquez, Hatfield drew a Colt with his right hand and threw slugs over the nearest peons.

A COUPLE fired wildly but any of the Pea's followers with a cool enough head to attempt careful aim would also see they could hardly bring down the running figure without also hitting their master.

And Captain Bill McDowell entered the shindig. He had come galloping down the hill as the hubbub began. He sat his mustang on the far side of the wall, able to see over it from that height. He was working his heavy six-guns with shrewd effect. A peaked sombrero whipped from a rattled Mexican's ebon-haired head. Others howled and danced up and down as bullets kicked up dust around their bare feet. McDowell swept the compound with his accurate fire, protecting his friend's rear and blasting a retreat route to the wall.

In the pens horses began bucking and running around in panic at the terrific hubbub. All of the Pea's hirelings who were at the compound were out, shouting madly. People in nearby huts were peering from windows and doors as the uproar dominated the early morning.

At the barrier the Ranger, his breath rasping in and out of his powerful lungs, thrust the struggling but helpless Enriquez across the top. McDowell got a hold with one hand and dragged the Pea over his saddle, the horn ramming into the Mexican's middle and knocking out his wind.

Shrill whistles came from Hatfield's lips as he rolled over the adobe wall and dropped, unwounded, on the safe side.

"Hustle, Cap'n. I'll be right along."

McDowell shoved off, rounding a building. The golden sorrel trotted up and Hatfield hit leather in a running leap, following his chief away from there.

Lead sang around him, but futilely, until he had put an adobe shack between himself and the infuriated Mexicans.

Soon he overtook McDowell, who was having his troubles trying to hold *El Chicaro* and control his excited, dancing mustang.

"I'll take the little cuss," offered Hatfield. He drew close and seizing the Pea, yanked him across the gap. "Keep still or I'll make yuh," he warned. "We're Texas Rangers."

"Rangers!"

Enriquez quit trying to break free. He wailed in abject misery. In the dawn light he stared up into the grim features of his captor. Hatfield's face was streaked with black but at such close range the Pea, studying him, suddenly realized who had him.

"Hatfield! How did you get to Austin? *Ai, ai,* I knew it, I knew it."

"Where to, Ranger?" asked McDowell.

"We'll take him to headquarters, suh. Yuh can hold the fort while I do some plain and fancy work on the sidewinder." There was an ominous note in Hatfield's gruff tones, his eyes had turned the bleak, icy shade of Arctic seas and to the Pea he looked extremely ferocious.

Enriquez shuddered. McDowell dropped behind a few paces, gun drawn and watching back over his shoulder. He would hold off pursuit, for *El Chicaro's* men were saddling horses for the chase.

They galloped through the awakening city with the sun reddening the sky behind them. Several turns to confuse the trailers, and they were away. People stared from porches and the wooden walks as the Rangers tore through the center.

Buck Robertson was in headquarters plaza to greet them and knew his tall friend through the Mexican disguise.

"Jim—Jim!" he cried. He grinned at *El Chicaro.* "*Senor el jefe,*" he said, offering a low, mocking bow to the trembling captive. Enriquez was a martinet with his lowly employes, demanding the greatest respect from them.

"How's the ranch?" asked Hatfield.

"Fine. Lucas pulled out before dawn. We soon found why. The fellers yuh sent were comin'. The outlaws took to the monte and had a good start. Lockhart's better. He rode with Mr. Cargill and a bunch of others, includin' yore boys, to see if Lucas stopped at his hidden camp. If Dogface ain't there, Cargill aims to come on to Austin."

"*Bueno.* I want yuh to carry a message for us, Buck."

"I'm ready. Ate breakfast while I was hangin' around."

Buck had not known of his sister's peril for he had been at the besieged Deecee.

McDOWELL led *El Chicaro* inside and locked him up. The Ranger scratched a note to Cos Collins and Buck swung away on Old Heart 7 as the sun rose over Austin.

Hatfield washed up and resumed his own hat. He needed food and a drink. A couple of Rangers arrived, older men who had served in field companies in former days but now worked at headquarters.

McDowell was getting ready. All doors but the front were secured and the few fighters available were posted at strategic points. For both Hatfield and McDowell expected a violent reaction from Cyrus Isbell, who had challenged the Rangers at the heart of their empire. They were prepared to hold against Isbell's forces until trusted help returned from the field.

By clever, dangerous work Hatfield had managed to fend off Isbell's worst thrusts and he was maneuvering into a position from which he could seize the offensive against the master outlaw.

When he had eaten, Hatfield rolled a quirly and leaned against the bars of the cell. *El Chicaro* shivered miserably as he sat on the plank bunk, holding his head in his hands.

"We're keepin' yuh here as our guest, hombre," drawled Hatfield. "Yore life won't be worth a lead peso when Isbell finds out yuh've told us all about him."

"I won't speak!"

"Yuh will. We're chargin' yuh with killin' Ban Gregory and Tim Fralee." Hatfield was probing for a weak spot in the captive's armor. He drew a finger across his throat. "Yuh savvy what that means."

Hanging was an unpleasant thought and *El Chicaro* shuddered. "No, no. I didn't kill."

"Yuh're Isbell's chief helper, Enriquez.

I know all about yuh. Yuh carried orders and help from him to Dogface Lucas, and many other charges are against yuh."

He paused. *El Chicaro's* face worked nervously.

"Yuh're in mighty deep," went on the officer gravely. "Yore brother-in-law Gasca can't take yuh from us the way he freed Lucas that time. The Rangers don't surrender prisoners. We won't charge yuh in court till we're ready. Think it over. There's just one loophole for yuh."

Enriquez snatched at this straw of hope. "What is it?" he cried.

"Help me pin Isbell so he can't squirm loose."

CHAPTER XVIII

Break

EL CHICARO'S mouth opened and for a moment Hatfield thought that the small Mexican aide meant to tell all he knew of his evil chief.

But calls from the front office interrupted, broke the spell. Enriquez drew back and the Ranger hurried through to find McDowell confronting a well-dressed man—Rod Morales, the attorney who had been retained in Dogface Lucas' behalf.

"You hold my client, Juan Enriquez, sir," cried the lawyer, his face flushed as he argued with McDowell. "I demand his immediate release!"

"I'm hard of hearin'," drawled the old captain.

"He was seen as you kidnaped him and brought him here!" bawled Morales.

"Yuh say yuh're goin' to bite my ear?" McDowell scowled and took a step toward Morales, who stepped back as the tough old Ranger chief thrust out his jaw.

That was enough for Morales. Hastily he turned and fled outside where he jumped into his carriage and raced off. Hatfield watched the vehicle as Morales whipped his horse toward the Capitol.

"I reckon he'll see the adjutant general and mebbe the Governor too, suh," he said to McDowell. "And there's Cy Isbell!"

The keen-eyed Ranger had spied the beefy contractor up the broad avenue piercing the capital's center. Isbell was riding a handsome, glistening black gelding and had donned riding trousers and a brown silk shirt. A cream-colored Stetson with a curved brim was strapped to his massive head.

"He's fetched quite a crowd along," muttered McDowell.

Squads of armed men surrounded Isbell. Then the Rangers saw Morales hop down to confer with his employer. Isbell glanced toward headquarters, dismounted, and dropped rein. He entered the Capitol, with Morales at his side excitedly gesticulating.

McDowell drew in a deep breath of the warming air. Austin was beginning to hum.

"Now for the test, Hatfield," the old chief said. "I can figger Isbell's next move. That lawyer will get a writ for Enriquez, while Isbell puts on his pressure. Isbell has influence around town and unless we can prove he's outlaw it's his word against ours. Yuh savvy the old story bandits try. He'll yelp the Rangers are persecutin' him and his friends. I won't hand over *El Chicaro,* but if the Pea won't accuse Isbell we're in the stew."

"Yes suh. Reckon we got about twenty minutes to win or lose."

Hatfield turned back toward the cells in the rear, picking up a lariat on his way. His rugged face was grimly set as he unlocked the gate and stepped in, starting for Enriquez.

As Hatfield shook out the coiled rope *El Chicaro* nervously licked his lips.

"What you do?" he asked uncertainly.

"I'm tyin' yuh up and runnin' yuh out to the Deecee," announced the Ranger. "Those cowhands are mighty sore at yuh. They savvy yuh helped gun 'em. Several were wounded in the scrap."

"They'll lynch me!" gasped Enriquez.

"Just the same yuh're goin'. I could guarantee to pertect yuh here, but Isbell's after yuh. Once he gets yuh he'll make shore yuh never have another chance to say anything against him."

The Pea was shaky, tired out, and beneath his pomp as patron of his countrymen, whom he treated as slaves, he was a coward. Hatfield had tied his hands behind him and had stooped to secure his

ankles when *El Chicaro* cried enough.

"I will tell!" he agreed. "But you must help me."

He began to talk.

It was not long before a whistle told of coming trouble. Hatfield left the Pea in his cell and joined McDowell.

"Here comes General Steel, full-steam ahead!" said the Ranger chief.

The adjutant general had borrowed a saddled horse from someone in Isbell's crew, and was galloping toward Ranger headquarters. The beefy contractor and his men tagged after. The AG was the commander of Texas Rangers.

The general's face was beet-red and he was puffing heavily as he slid from the mustang. He was stout and oldish, with a ring of fat at his waist, and horseback riding was not much in his line.

"What's all this, McDowell?" he cried. "Cyrus Isbell says yuh're holdin' one of his friends, persecutin' all of 'em. He aims to complain to the Governor soon as he comes in." Suddenly Steel saw Hatfield. "Ranger Hatfield!" he exclaimed. "Yuh were ordered to El Paso days ago. What are yuh doin' in Austin?"

ISBELL had pulled up some yards off, with his bunch. They sat their saddles, watching the scene.

"Will yuh come in back, suh?" drawled Hatfield.

The angry general stalked inside. McDowell shut the front door and dropped the iron bar securing it as the Rangers followed Steel to the cell block.

"Mebbe yuh savvy Juan Enriquez, suh," began Hatfield, as the general scowled. "He's Isbell's assistant around town, supplies stolen hosses, oxen and cattle. He'll tell yuh all about his boss."

El Chicaro had already finished telling the Ranger his story, and now began repeating it.

"Isbell killed Ban Gregory, senores," he said, "for refusing to obey him. I saw Isbell do it. Isbell ordered others slain by the Coralsnake, contractors such as Fralee and Cos Collins, and land owners whose property he wished to seize. Dogface Lucas was hired to steal stock from Cargill and Labry, and to drygulch them, since Isbell wanted the ranches."

The general puffed out his cheeks, scarcely able to believe what he was hearing.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Senor, Isbell was determined to control all building around Austin. For this he needed stone, timber and lime, oxen and horses and other things. These are all close at hand on Cargill's and Labry's range."

"That's gospel, General." Hatfield nodded. "I saw the outcroppin's. There's even stone coal, a big anthracite deposit that runs under part of the Deecee and the Square L. Isbell's kept the prices sky-high so veterans and other buyers flockin' to Austin have to pay almost double what they should. As for Coralsnake Vesper, he was Isbell's killer in town and terrorized the builders so they wouldn't dare rebel against Isbell's machine. I caught up with the Coralsnake this mornin'."

The adjutant general stared at the grim, rugged face of McDowell's star officer.

"Isbell's made a fortune and stands to clean up a lot more if we don't snub him short," growled McDowell. "He'd have owned Austin if Hatfield hadn't been on the job."

"This changes the picture!"

Steel's anger had abruptly turned against Cyrus Isbell. He swung and stalked to the front door, with McDowell after him.

Hatfield lingered to slam the cell gate shut on the valuable prisoner. When he reached the front, Steel was yelling at Isbell:

"I'm swearin' out a warrant for yore immediate arrest, Isbell! My Rangers have showed yuh up, and Juan Enriquez has told us everything. Yuh're a ripsnortin' outlaw and yuh'll stretch rope for it!"

Isbell knew instantly that his evasive game was done for. Nothing remained but to attempt a final, desperate violence in the hope he might thereby destroy the chief witnesses who could ruin him. The beefy contractor was shaking with fury as he gave a hand signal to his men. He slid a hairy hand inside his silk shirt.

"Watch out, suh," warned Hatfield. "They aim to open fire!"

He pushed the general back as Isbell threw up his pistol, drawn from a shoul-

der holster. The toughs with him were cocking guns. Hatfield, seeking to get the general to safety and the door closed, felt the jolting sting of a bullet from Isbell's Colt. It slashed the flesh of his right thigh, missing Steel and McDowell by inches. The lead cut a groove in the floor, kicking up a long splinter as it ploughed into the wood.

McDowell dropped the bar as a blast came from Isbell's crew. The portal was thick enough to check metal from light weapons.

"On guard, boys!" roared McDowell. His eyes were shining with battle light.

"Here, General," drawled Hatfield. "Yuh may need this." He handed one of his revolvers to Steel.

Hurriedly they manned windows to hold the fort as Isbell's bunch threw themselves from their saddles and charged. They pushed close to the adobe walls.

ONLY a handful of men were defending headquarters. One squad reached a side entrance and began ramming the panels with a crowbar picked up at the nearby stables. The whole crew was storming headquarters with determination at Isbell's orders, for he realized that his sole chance of continuing as czar of the Austin building trades lay in quickly silencing the few officers and the witness, Enriquez.

McDowell, Steel and the clerks were busy trying to keep the attackers off. Hatfield flitted from window to window, his eyes searching for Isbell. Then he glimpsed the beefy man as Isbell peered around a stable corner to see how the fight was going. He was not risking his own life.

The side door splintered and was banged in, smashed to smithereens by repeated blows of the iron bar. Bullets whizzed through the hall, forcing the defenders back around the turn into the main corridor. More of Isbell's fighters were feinting at the opposite wings. A couple of gunhands lay unmoving in the yard, full of Ranger lead, but most of Isbell's picked bodyguard was composed of hardened, experienced fighters who knew how to protect themselves.

Hatfield, Colt hot in his slim hand, sought to drive them from that breached entry. McDowell was at the right angle across the side passage from him, fighting furiously. Powder smoke swirled in the confined air, and the explosions deafening.

Two killers, one with a sawed-off shotgun, suddenly lashed around and through the doorway. The shotgun belched buck which spread, snarling within a hair of the Ranger and his captain.

CHAPTER XIX

At the Yards

DESPERATELY Hatfield crouched in the hallway. Blood was oozing from the flesh wound in his thigh and from splinter cuts in his face and bare arms. He bobbed out and the man with the shotgun whipped his weapon on him. But the Ranger Colt blazed a shade ahead. The outlaw doubled up, and the second load of his buck whooshed into the boards.

The next moment McDowell put a slug through the shoulder of the wounded gunfighter's companion.

"In and at 'em!" howled an Isbell lieutenant.

He led a dozen more on the heels of the first pair who were rolling and howling in the corridor, blocking the way. Guns cracked and angry men howled in battle fury.

Steel, McDowell and Hatfield gave them all they had. The main charge slowed, then the attackers turned and ran out, fading away.

"There they go!" shouted McDowell, galloping after the enemy.

Hatfield limped out and General Steel joined them in the plaza. They moved to the front and saw many of Isbell's riders pelting up Congress Avenue, spurs dug in to the hilt. But the burly contractor was out of sight.

Then a band of men carrying carbines, shotguns and Colts were moving in from the east approaches. They were led by Cos Collins, at whose side was Buck Robertson. It was the arrival of these reinforcements which had helped send Isbell running.

"Had yore message, Ranger!" cried Collins, dismounting to seize the tall officer's hand. "I got together as many of the boys as were on hand. More are on the way. Yuh pinned Isbell?"

"We got him slidin'." Hatfield nodded.

Buck had carried the Ranger's note to the builder. In it Hatfield had requested that Collins bring all available aid to headquarters and Collins had acted swiftly.

General Steel mopped his lobster-red face with a large bandanna.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "Reckon I should have stuck to my own den, Cap'n! Ain't so much excitement there as at yores. Haven't seen so much action since Pickett's charge. . . . Yes suh, Mr. Collins, Cy Isbell is outlaw all right. And the Rangers will fetch him in."

Hatfield was ready for action despite his hurts. He reloaded his Colts and checked his carbine. Collins had with him a dozen friends, victims of Isbell's gouging, or the builder's own loyal aides.

"We got to take Isbell," Hatfield told McDonell and Steel. "I s'pose he'll snatch up what he can and check out of Austin."

He signaled Buck who hurried to his side. "Hop on Old Heart Seven, Buck. Run up and take a look-see at Isbell's offices."

The youth galloped off. McDowell and the others began saddling their horses.

"I think I'll go along for the ride," said Steel. "Loan me a good war hoss, McDowell." The mustang Steel had ridden from the Capitol had dashed off in the general stampede to get away.

Guns were being checked as the men prepared to move out against Cy Isbell. Goldy stood ready. As Hatfield threw a long leg over his pronged hull, he sighted Buck tearing back in the center of Congress Avenue, low over the chunky gray. Buck waved to him and Hatfield trotted the gelding out to meet the boy.

"Jim!" Buck cried. "Dogface Lucas is in town! His van's at Isbell's yards, the whole outfit, includin' the *vaqueros* Enriquez lent him. They're seethin' up there like a swarm of bees!"

"Isbell ain't through yet," muttered Hatfield.

Law and order had been tossed to the four winds as Isbell heaved his mighty power into full action, seeking to save himself and his regime. The city marshals would be almost helpless against such an army and even with Collins' band the Rangers were outnumbered five to one.

Curious citizens who had heard the blasting guns at Ranger headquarters had approached to see what was going on, while at the Capitol some of the lawmakers had come out on the steps and were staring down the street. Otherwise the turbulent town went on about its business, unaware of the struggle, each man intent on his own small troubles and affairs.

"Hi there, Ranger!"

The hail came from Asa Lockhart, astride Tuffy. The flash rider made the turn into the Rangers' plaza from the west road.

"Ace! Mighty glad to see yuh."

LOCKHART'S features showed the signs of abuse he had undergone while in Dogface Lucas' clutches, he was pale under his coating of tan, and drawn with fatigue. Yet he was determined to keep going.

"The boss is comin'," announced Lockhart. "Lucas wasn't at his hideout. We picked up his trail at dawn, though, and it led toward town. We sighted their rear guard enterin' the city a while ago, north of here."

"*Bueno*," said Hatfield. "How many has Cargill got with him, Ace?"

"Every man he and Labry could spare, as well as yore Ranger recruits and the deputy marshal's."

Hatfield sighed with relief. Now he had the forces necessary to break through Isbell's defenses. He was certain that the outlaw chief would cover himself, perhaps try to escape behind his massed fighters.

Twenty minutes later, Dillard Cargill, Steve Labry, the Rangers and deputies, and waddies from the Deecee and Square L gathered in the plaza, listening to Hatfield's talk before the battle. Their horses were lathered and worn from the long chase after Dogface Lucas, but they could last another mile to Isbell's place of business and home.

"We're goin' after 'em, gents!" announced Hatfield. "Pertect yoreselves as far as yuh can. Some of Isbell's crew

can fight, but a bunch of Lucas' bandits won't last long when they see we're determined to have it out."

Marshaling his fighting men, Hatfield led the way up Congress Avenue toward Isbell's yards, riding his golden gelding. Behind him rode Cos Collins and other men who had been wronged by Isbell, the ranchers and their loyal cowboys, state and city officers. General Steel and Captain McDowell were up front and McDowell's frosty old eyes beamed with pride as his star field Ranger exhibited the stuff of which he was made.

They passed the Capitol where legislators and citizens gaped at the armed array. Shod hoofs clopped on the road and the blazing sun flashed from steel gun-barrels.

Hatfield carried a carbine at the ready across his pommel and his big Colts rode loaded in their oiled holsters at his thighs. His Stetson was strapped tight and his rugged face was set as he watched for the outlaws they wanted.

Pushing steadily on, they came within a block of the contractor's yards before running into opposition. Then the Ranger recognized a couple of Dogface's outlaws as they hastily sent shots his way and pivoted their mustangs, racing back, shouting the alarm as they tore through the block. Isbell had men watching the different avenues of approach.

"Spread out, boys!" ordered the Ranger. "Collins, go round to the right and come in shootin'. Cargill, you and Labry move to the left. We'll keep on straight ahead."

McDowell was grinning with the sheer joy of battle. Men grew tense with anticipation as the moment of decision neared. Some kept a poker expression, others smiled or laughed to show they were not afraid. Guns were fingered, checked again and again. Few could enter such a scrap without experiencing qualms. The bravest soul could feel chilling fear, and a warrior's prowess depended on how completely he could master his natural emotions.

The Ranger was cool and businesslike. Many eyes watched him, gaining comfort from his mien. He was human, though, and facing the blasts of antagonistic guns was never a pleasant task. Yet it was a job which had to be done as he fought for the right in Texas.

Down the block the yards spread out into full view. Behind fences and piles of building stone, lumber and other materials, crouched at the sides of buildings, were the gunslingers. To the rear, escape was offered along the far road through gates, and horse holders gripped bunches of reins, keeping the mustangs ready.

A rifle bullet whizzed over Hatfield's head. He threw his carbine to shoulder and opened fire. This was the signal for volleys that shattered the warm morning air.

Dust kicked up in spurts from the road, a horse went down screaming, and swearing fighters charged.

The golden sorrel picked up speed, galloping in a zigzag fashion toward the yards. From left and right came war cries as Cargill and his cowboys, pushing in from one side, and Cos Collins from the other, drove into the battle.

The Ranger's gray-green eyes saw the slugs hailing into the enemy. He glimpsed a number of outlaws and *vaqueros* against whom he had fought at the Deecee and on the range, as they bobbed out to shoot. From three angles the attack rose to a high-pitched fury.

Lead forced Isbell's defenders back. McDowell, Steel, Cargill, Lockhart, Collins and Buck were in the thick of it.

CHAPTER XX

Duel

MOVING targets they all were, and it was necessary for a bandit to show himself in order to aim and fire. Fewer and fewer dared pop up for keen-eyed, accurate marksmen were making hits. Hatfield's men were in the right and they kept on coming.

"Whoopee-ee!" Captain Bill McDowell's high-pitched Rebel yell triumphed over the clashing din.

Figures were jumping up to run for the mustangs at the back of the spacious yards. First to desert were Dogface's outlaws. They seized reins, leaping to their saddles to flee. After them trotted

vaqueros, leaving only a handful of gun toughs to stick it out.

Hatfield was ready for this. He threw his wings around and, with the diminished fire from the walls and buildings allowing it, the avengers galloped through to cut off escape.

The Ranger flashed past the office and could look over a section of fence. Dogface Lucas, his ugly features twisted with rage and alarm, was trying to stem the rout, cursing his men and threatening them as they fled.

Hatfield pulled rein, sliding the golden sorrel to a stop. He left his saddle, stepping on the fence top and jumping down into the yards. A heap of building stone offered cover and he sang out to Lucas, dropping his empty carbine and drawing a Colt.

"Dogface! Throw down!"

Lucas heard him, whirling, with his pistol coming to firing position. The bared teeth of the big, muscular horse thief gleamed as he sighted his arch-foe, the man who had once captured him, and who had again driven him to earth.

Dogface fell to one knee and let go with a shot as Hatfield raised his thumb from his hammer. Lucas' Stetson flew from his head. The bullet sent by the chief of the horse thieves sprayed grit over Hatfield, crouched by the stone pile.

The Ranger lowered his sights and took that vital breath needed for really accurate, cool aim. Dogface could see the officer's head and right shoulder and tried for him again, but was a foot off his target. The ominous *zing* of the lead did not shake Hatfield's slim hand.

Lucas stayed in his squatting position for a moment, but the weight of his gun pulled down his arm. He sought to wipe at his eyes with his free hand but could not make it. Then he slowly keeled over on his side, lying in a heap. His men paid no attention to their fallen leader, as they grabbed horses in sheer panic.

But Hatfield had them cut off. Only a few managed to slide by before the closing prongs of the Ranger's columns came together. For a breathless second the outlaws paused, faced by the menacing guns. Then they began to surrender, tossing down weapons and raising their hands.

Cargill and the rest were busy securing the prisoners when Hatfield rode up to McDowell.

"Cap'n," he informed, "Lucas has cashed in his chips. But I can't find Isbell."

"Huh!" growled McDowell. "Got to have the sidewinder, Hatfield."

"Yes suh. Nobody's safe with him on the prod. I'm headin' for his house. Mebbe he'll stop there to pick up loot on his way to the chaparral."

"I'll foller yuh," declared McDowell.

The golden sorrel was rested, and warmed up for the gallop. No horse Hatfield had ever seen could keep up with Goldy at his top speed. Now, pushed by the necessity of capturing Cyrus Isbell, Hatfield let his gelding run.

McDowell came after him, with Buck Robertson not far from the old Ranger captain.

Scarcely a mile from the big yards where Isbell had conducted his monopoly in the Austin building trades stood his mansion in its landscaped grounds. The Ranger had been here one night, seeking information to be used against the man.

It was now plain to Hatfield that Isbell had left Dogface Lucas and his other lieutenants to divert the opposition and give him time to make his escape. No doubt Isbell had tricked his associates into this. If they somehow managed to win, well and good, and the beefy contractor could always return to the city. If they lost, as Isbell must have realized they would as the Rangers organized more and more power against them, then Isbell would be gone.

REACHING the corner of the contractor's estate, Hatfield heard the hum of a rifle bullet. It came from the carriage porch. Half a dozen riders were there.

Taking shelter behind the trunk of an immense oak, Hatfield studied the situation. The gunhands at Isbell's were picked members of Isbell's personal bodyguard. He glanced around. McDowell was two hundred yards away, Buck a few jumps behind him, and both coming as fast as they could.

He waved to them to watch it as they pounded up. Then he saw Cy Isbell hurry from the door of his mansion, carrying

a carpet-bag. The boss mounted a powerful black gelding waiting saddled for him and rode off around the house. Over there was a side gate and as they crossed the grassy lawn, the Ranger again sighted them, Isbell racing ahead.

"There he goes, Cap'n!" sang out the Ranger.

On the sorrel, Hatfield whirled after Isbell. The bodyguard lagged behind, opening fire on the Rangers, permitting Isbell to forge ahead. Rising, wooded hills loomed northward, offering sanctuary to the fugitive.

"I'm goin' to ride around 'em, Cap'n," said Hatfield. "Try and hold the guards."

"Go to it, Ranger!"

Buck had a light carbine and McDowell was armed with his cherished Frontier Model Colt. They pressed Isbell's fighters as Hatfield flashed out, taking to the open fields. The Ranger's pistol flamed as they tried for him. He was traveling at terrific speed, as Goldy tore on.

A couple of them swung and galloped up the dirt road to cover Isbell but Hatfield was quickly past them and gaining yard by yard. The black gelding Isbell was riding was a magnificent creature, and fresh. Also Isbell was well-started. As soon as he had put sufficient distance between the slower horses of the bodyguard and himself, Hatfield slanted in and again took to the highway.

It was a quarter of a mile on before he came within pistol range of the contractor. Isbell was a heavy man, and while he was a good rider he could not compare with the tall officer. He quirted and spurred the black, seeking more speed, but his weight told.

Inexorably the golden gelding drew up on the other horse. Hatfield saw Isbell's red face as the fleeing man glanced back over a hunched shoulder. Isbell knew then that he could not win, for Hatfield was almost upon him.

Suddenly Isbell ripped his rein, veering the black in a sliding arc. He thrust a hairy fat hand inside his shirt and drew his revolver. The baleful eyes glared at the Ranger who had brought him from his apparently secure throne to this lowly end.

"Hold it, Isbell!" The officer gave honorable warning.

Isbell fired. The bullet clipped close but the black had danced nervously, interfering with accuracy. Hatfield's replying metal slewed Isbell askew in the saddle. The beefy man sagged and his chin dropped, his arms sinking.

The black darted away but this movement threw Isbell's body off the leather seat. His weight dragging the ground quickly brought the horse to a stop. Hatfield came up, dismounted, and checked over his opponent. The carpet-bag which held money, the loot from Isbell's outlaw enterprises, was on the ground beside the man.

Isbell was still breathing but rasping terribly. He had been hit through the lungs close to the heart. As Hatfield stretched him out, he shuddered and died.

Gunshots and yells sent the Ranger back to his horse. McDowell and Buck were driving Isbell's bodyguard before them, and Hatfield instantly plunged into the affray. When the gunhands saw that Isbell was finished they split up, hunting escape they could not find, but the Rangers were already upon them. . . .

AUSTIN basked in the warm sunshine, blandly quiet and apparently innocent of the knowledge of any unusual turbulence. It was hard to believe that only a short while before Cyrus Isbell had made his bid for control of this town.

Up at the Capitol a bill had just been introduced to provide free barrels of whisky for everyone over the age of ninety, and an acrimonious debate was raging on the floor. In the Mexican quarter the children played around the hovels with the goats, dogs and fowl.

Anita Robertson, returned to her home by the Ranger after Isbell's defeat, was teaching in her school, while Buck had reluctantly returned to the Academy.

"I'm mighty glad that flash rider's hitchin' up with Cargill's girl, Claire," remarked Captain Bill McDowell, as he and Jim Hatfield sat in the cool office at headquarters.

Damage here had been repaired and all that remained to remind of the fight were bullet-holes in the walls. *El Chicaro* and other prisoners had been turned over to the proper authorities. For his assistance to the law, Juan Enriquez was to be let off with a light sentence.

"Yes suh, Lucas and his bunch shore gave pore Lockhart a goin' over," continued McDowell. "It was all a tough fight, but we won it, thanks to you. Never come closer, I reckon. Isbell hit right at our heart and had us chokin' the horn and clawin' leather for a while. But now the janitor in Hades has some more star boarders on his hands."

"I hear tell prices are fallin', Cap'n," remarked Hatfield. "Cos Collins says everybody can build a lot cheaper with Isbell gone. Folks will get a square deal in Austin now."

"*Bueno.* That's what we're aimin' at. And folks will get a square deal all through Texas if we got anything to say!"

McDowell banged his fist on the desk and the inkwell nearly spilled over on the report lying before him. He picked up the sheet.

"I don't cotton to this, Hatfield," he complained. "It's way off near the Mexican border. How's that wound of yores?"

"Healin' fine, suh. I could ride a thousand miles." The Ranger smiled.

That was what he craved, the open trail, the danger and excitement of clashing with enemies of the Lone Star state. Soon he was on his way, the golden sorrel springy under him as he took the field, carrying the law to a challenging foe.

"Wait Till They Start Building Their Blasted Railroad—Then Watch the Fireworks!"

THAT was the comment of Crane Ballard, the square-jawed, hard-eyed president of the M & K, when the C & P extension bill passed.

Ranger Captain Bill McDowell had something to say on the subject, too. "It means war," he declared. "A hell-roaring railroad war. There'll be folks pouring in, and money spent like water. And every owlhoot within a thousand miles will be swoopin' down on the section, on the lookout for pickin's. Reckon I better make a provision against that. Go get Jim Hatfield—in a hurry!"

When drygulching, sabotage and treachery impede the construction of the railway, Jim Hatfield's on the scene—and presses his engineering skill, plus his gunswift ability, into service to bring peace and justice to the range! Follow the smashing exploits of the ace of Texas Rangers in—

THE SPOILERS' TRAIL

By JACKSON COLE

NEXT MONTH'S EXCITING COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL!

SHERIFF BEN BOYD

Ready and Waiting

By SAM BRANT

When bank bandits stalk the range, Sheriff Ben Boyd believes in preparedness!

SHERIFF BEN BOYD sat in a chair on the porch of the Longhorn Hotel and cursed the fates that had given him a broken leg. It wasn't so much the leg that bothered Boyd—for the doctor had done a good job in setting it—as the inactivity. He was used to being constantly on the go.

Boyd heaved a deep sigh of relief, therefore, when he saw his deputy, Joe Mead, come out of the sheriff's office down the street and amble along the plank walk toward the hotel. From sunrise to late night Boyd had insisted upon remaining there on the hotel porch.

"There's only one street in our thrivin' city," the sheriff said. "And from where I'm sittin' now I can see just about every part of Longhorn. That way, if there is any trouble, the Law is ready and waitin'."

He was forty-three now and he had been a lawman for nearly twenty years. First a deputy, and then for ten years the sheriff of Mesquite County. There was a sprinkling of gray in his thick dark hair, the wiry leanness of his youth was still with him, as was the restlessness.

There had been no glamour in the way he had been hurt. His horse had stumbled and thrown him right on the main street of the town on a rainy day. The fall had broken his leg. Men who saw what happened had carried the sheriff into the doctor's office across the street. Old Doctor Ramsey had set the leg and eventually put it in a plaster cast. That had been three days ago.

Since then Sheriff Boyd had remained on the hotel porch, only leaving to hobble inside for meals, and to go to bed at night. He had a pair of crutches that the doctor had lent him, but his six-gun was in his holster and his rifle stood against the wall near his chair. The sheriff was ready for trouble, you bet!

Joe Mead reached the hotel and came up on the porch. Sandy haired, and easy-going, the deputy was what might be termed a casual man. Having worked with the sheriff for five years he was not inclined to treat his boss with any great degree of awe.

"See any sign of them, Ben?" Mead asked as he dropped into a chair near the sheriff. "Smoke signals, or anything?"

"What are you talkin' about, Joe?" the sheriff demanded impatiently.

"Them Indians you must be expectin' to raid the town," said the deputy with a smile. "You shore have been expectin' something gosh awful to happen."

BUT the sheriff remained quite undisturbed by Mead's scepticism.

"Like I've often told you, it is always

good to be ready for trouble," he answered serenely. "I've been readin' the papers and right now crime is shore rampant in the state of Arizona."

"It is?" exclaimed Mead in surprise.

"Shore." The sheriff nodded solemnly. "A drummer on the Prescott stage lost a wallet containin' four dollars and sixty-eight cents. Claims the driver or the stage guard picked his pocket—probably by remote control. In Tombstone somebody got Mrs. Brady's goat."

"What was she mad about?" the deputy asked.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Brady. You said somebody got her goat."

"Oh." The sheriff looked relieved. "It was a real goat. Somebody stole it."

"So far I ain't impressed," said Mead. "What we need is bigger and better crimes, Sheriff."

"Accordin' to the papers we've got them," said Boyd. "There was a bank robbery in Tucson day or so ago, the Overland Stage was held up south of here last week—"

"And Mrs. Brady lost her goat," finished Mead.

The sheriff made no comment. He was watching four men who had ridden in from the south and halted their horses at the hitching-rail in front of the Palace Saloon across and down the street to Boyd's left.

"Yes, sir," said the sheriff picking up his Winchester. "I'm the best shot with a long gun in this state. See that shingle stickin' up at the corner of the feed store down at the end of the street."

"Seen it for years," said Mead. "You just notice it, Ben?"

Boyd placed the rifle to his shoulder and took careful aim. Mead thought the sheriff was just sighting the gun. The deputy jumped when the rifle roared. Down the street a bullet tore away the hanging shingle on the side of the feed store.

The sheriff noticed that the four men across the street were now shielded by their horses, so that if any bullets came their way they had some protection. They obviously had been around. Boyd found the fact quite interesting.

"When you broke yore leg did you hit your head?" Mead looked anxiously at the sheriff. "What day is it?"

"You tell me," said Boyd calmly, as he ejected the shell from the rifle, and worked another cartridge into the chamber. "What day is it?"

"Tuesday, I mean Thursday," said Mead.

"It's Monday," the sheriff said, placing the rifle back against the wall.

The four strangers had discovered there would be no more shooting. A big man stepped out through the swinging doors of the saloon. He said a few words to the strangers, and then they all went into the saloon.

"Monday," muttered Joe Mead dazedly. "Today is Monday."

"Never mind that, Joe," snapped the sheriff in sudden impatience. "I just saw Lem Carlson talkin' to four strangers. They all went into the Palace. You better head over there and take a good squint at them four hombres."

"Pals of Lem Carlson," said the deputy as he got to his feet. "I don't think I'm goin' to like them hombres."

"I didn't ask you to kiss 'em," said the sheriff. "I told you to find out about them. Get goin', Joe."

The deputy walked slowly across the street, kicking up the dust with his boot toes like a boy on his way to school who didn't want to go. The sheriff drew out his pipe and filled and lighted it.

"There's a man so busy clingin' to his first childhood that he never will reach his second," decided Boyd as he watched Mead finally pass through the swinging doors of the saloon. "Joe just naturally won't grow up."

The sheriff found his thoughts drifting to Lem Carlson. Carlson owned the Palace Saloon, and had been suspected in being behind some crooked deals in which a couple of neighboring ranchers had lost their spreads. But when it came to a showdown nothing could be proven against Carlson.

ACCORDING to rumors the Longhorn Bank had held mortgages on the two ranches. Carlson had bought the mortgages from Ed Jarrett, the president of the bank, and had foreclosed on the ranchers. Though Carlson had never admitted having anything to do with the deal, Ed Jarrett had told the sheriff about

it in confidence. The two ranchers had cleared out of that part of the country without saying anything.

Ed Jarrett usually ate in the hotel dining room in the middle of the day. Today the sheriff had finished his meal early and hobbled back out onto the porch. He had seen the banker go into the hotel half an hour ago. Now Jarrett came out on the porch as Boyd knocked the ashes out of his pipe and put it away. Jarrett was a stout, bald headed man, whose smile always reminded Boyd of a fish gasping.

"Heard you shooting out here a little while ago, Sheriff," Jarrett said, dropping down in the chair near Boyd. "Was a bit worried until someone told me that you apparently were just trying out your rifle. Thought there was trouble."

"Not yet." The sheriff took off his hat and placed it in his lap. "But there could be."

Jarrett reached over and picked up Boyd's rifle. Then he sank back in his chair, holding the gun across his knees as he examined it. Across the street the four strangers came out of the saloon. Neither Carlson nor the deputy was with them. The men stared at the hotel porch, saw the sheriff and the banker sitting there and were apparently satisfied.

"I forget the name of the boss of that bunch," the sheriff said casually.

"Carl Springer." Jarrett spoke before he thought. He scowled, and swung the rifle so that the barrel was pointed at the sheriff's chest. "I feel right bad about your accident. Here I was examining your rifle and all of a sudden it went off. Bullet went right into your heart, Sheriff."

"No," said Boyd firmly. "It won't work, Jarrett. You forget about my hat."

"What?" Jarrett stared at the Stetson in the sheriff's lap. "What's your hat got to do with it."

Out on the street three of the strangers strolled toward the Longhorn Bank. The fourth man remained with the horses. On the hotel porch the sheriff's eyes were hard as he gazed at Ed Jarrett.

"I'm holdin' a hide-out gun under the hat," Boyd said. "It is aimed at you—and if it goes off it won't be an accident. Just try to touch the trigger of that rifle and see what happens!"

It was not a particularly warm day, but Jarrett was suddenly sweating as he gazed at the hat. With trembling hands he placed the rifle back against the wall at the rear of the porch.

"It was all a joke," he said. "I just wanted to see if I could scare you, Sheriff." He uttered a burst of laughter that was like the braying of a frightened mule. "Just a joke!"

"When I get around to it, I'll laugh." The sheriff's voice was hard. "Pick up that rifle and walk over to the porch steps." With his right hand he drew his six-gun out of the holster and covered the banker. His left hand was still hidden beneath the hat. "Do like I say!"

Jarrett grabbed up the rifle and moved to the head of the steps. He stood there nervously, his back to the sheriff.

"Aim the rifle at that hombre guardin' the horses," commanded the sheriff. "Fast!"

"I won't." Jarrett glanced back over his shoulder, his fat face contorted with fear. "Soon as I do, Springer will kill me. He will think the whole thing is a frame-up. I won't do it!"

The three strangers had disappeared inside the bank. The fourth man still guarded the horses.

"All right," snapped Boyd. "Then give me the rifle. I just wanted to make sure that you and Springer's bunch were workin' together. Evidently you have been usin' the bank money for your gambling; I've seen you in the Palace at the card tables night after night. This is about the time the state examiner usually comes to check up on the bank. A robbery would cover any money you had taken from bein' discovered, Jarrett."

JARRETT suddenly handed the sheriff the rifle, and he did not notice that the hand Boyd drew out from beneath his hat to grab the gun was empty. Then Jarrett turned and dashed wildly into the hotel. The sheriff made no attempt to stop him.

The three men came out of the bank, carrying money bags in one hand and six-guns in the other. His gun back in the holster and his hat on his head the sheriff raised the Winchester to his shoulder, aimed carefully and fired. One of

(Continued on page 74)

the Modern

DURING a riot in Longview, Texas, the local authorities found themselves unable to cope with the lawless elements and placed an urgent call for the Rangers.

As the next train arrived, the Mayor, the chief of police and a crowd of citizens were on the platform, waiting to extend a warm welcome.

Cheers greeted Ranger Captain Bill

Capt. M. T. Gonzaullas, Commander of Company B of the Texas Rangers, with headquarters at Dallas

McDonald as he stepped off the train, waving to the throng.

"Glad to see you, Captain—just in time! Are the other Rangers in the next car?"

"What other Rangers?" queried McDonald, a smallish man with gimlet eyes.

"Why—er, we've got a bloody riot. We called for the Rangers."

"I am the Rangers," replied the Captain, with the air of Louis XIV declaring, "I am the State!"

The crowd stood dumb and nervous as Captain McDonald delivered the line for which his name is enshrined in the heart of Texas.

"One riot—one Ranger," he said simply.

The next day, Longview's rioters, having reconsidered their situation, returned to routine affairs, discouraged and whipped by the audacity of one Ranger.

Unlimited Capacity!

The Longview episode serves to illustrate the aura of unlimited capacity which surrounds the Texas Rangers. Their authority rarely resisted, their bravery never doubted, the little band of fifty hand-picked Rangers wields a moral power out of all proportion to its numerical strength.

Sworn to suppress riots and insurrections, to protect life and property, to apprehend fugitives and investigate major crimes, the Rangers roam over a territory equal to the combined areas of France, Holland, Belgium, and Ireland.

Their protective arm is thrown around some 7,000,000 Texans, scattered over 267,000 square miles and 253 counties, extending from the damp lowlands near Beaumont to the parched mountains near El Paso, some 850 miles away. And over all this broad landscape, in every town, village, and ranch, the riding Ranger is a comforting sight to those who want law and order.

By simple arithmetic, fifty Rangers for the state of Texas means that one Ranger

Termed the "smallest police force for the largest state," the Texas Rangers of today follow their own unwritten code—and carry their shining shield of justice throughout the Lone Star!

Rangers

by DON GLASSMAN

Members of Texas Rangers, Company B. Left to right: T. E. Seay, Kelly Rush, Stewart Stanley, Dick Oldham, Captain M. T. Gonzaullas, R. A. Crowder, Ernest Daniel, Joe Thompson, R. L. Badgett, N. K. Dixon. This photograph was taken by Joel Tisdale, Supervisor of Photography, Texas Dept. of Public Safety, Austin, Texas.

covers an average of five counties. Time and again, it has been proposed to employ one Ranger for each Texas county, but this suggestion is spurned on the ground that one Ranger, working around the clock, as Rangers have done since 1823, can adequately serve five counties.

Their Secret Weapon

The Rangers wield about as much legal authority as any other state police, but their influence is greater. Their secret weapon is a unique reputation, which for 125 years has steadily grown into a towering tradition of heroism and justice.

The forerunner and model for police organizations in the 48 states, the Ranger force was a seasoned, experienced body when the Canadian Mounted Police was founded, about 75 years ago. But the legend of Ranger power and invincibility belongs to the present as well. Several hundred Rangers were required to maintain order when Texas was a frontier state.

Today the Rangers handle the job with six companies of picked men and an annual budget under $200,000.

In this day of skyrocketing police budgets, expanding police forces, and police corruption, our tax-conscious citizens and law-makers might weigh and compare these figures in order to get a better grasp of law-enforcement costs. There are smaller states in this Union whose monthly state police budgets exceed that of mammoth Texas for a whole year.

Lest you underestimate the criminal elements in Texas and overestimate the superhuman feats of the Rangers, here are figures to show that Texas has its share of crime. On an average day the largest state is the scene of three murders, two cases of rape, 53 burglaries, five robberies, 33 auto thefts, and 150 miscellaneous thefts.

Local police effectively handle most of these violations, but the Rangers are concerned with all of them, especially crimes against state law and crimes which cross the boundaries of cities and counties. The Rangers are called whenever the local authorities are unable to handle a given situation. But at the end of the year, the man-hunting Rangers show a record of arrests and convictions out of all proportion to their numerical strength.

The man at the top and bottom of the Ranger story is Colonel Homer Garrison, Jr., tall, robust, spectacled, and soft-spoken.

He makes his headquarters on a military reservation, Camp Mabry, on the outskirts of Austin, the State capital.

In the Fight

You are likely to find Colonel Garrison behind his desk in a bright square room. Like many executives, he dictates letters and scans budgets, but the Chief Texas Ranger is literally "in the fight." That drawer at his right arm is filled with an arsenal of small arms. He demonstrated a new plastic "fist-club," more subtle than a conventional police club, for hand-tooled holsters as you will find north of the Rio Grande.

Apart from pistols, Stetson, and riding boots, which he wears in the field, there is nothing to distinguish Colonel Garrison's rank except a small diamond-studded gold emblem worn over his heart, a special badge of office presented to him in 1939 by employees of the Department. His Colonel's commission comes direct from the Governor and carries the same rank as a colonel in the state militia.

In October, 1948, Colonel Garrison was elevated from the post of First Vice President to President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police. He disclaims this honor as a tribute to personal achievement. He regards it as a testimonial and recognition of the whole Ranger organization, the men in the field and the scientists in the crime laboratory, whose effectiveness has been described by J. Edgar Hoover as second only to the laboratory of the Federal F.B.I.

Actually Colonel Garrison's rank and authority extend beyond the domain of the Rangers. His top title is Director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, which includes the far-flung State highway patrol, charged with traffic law enforcement.

An Ideal of Service

Colonel Garrison knows as well as any legislator why Texas can provide state police protection at an annual cost of about 35 cents for each inhabitant.

"The Rangers are effective for a number of reasons, but especially because we know that our first duty is to serve the people of this State. We do not expect them to serve us. That attitude pays off. In return, we receive fine cooperation from everyday, plain citizens. Wherever the Rangers go, they also get help from local and Federal law-enforcement agencies.

"The second big factor," he went on, "is the Ranger tradition, which began in the days before Texas became an independent republic. Stephen F. Austin organized a Ranger force of ten men whom he paid out of his own pocket. The First Texas Congress, meeting to establish the new Republic in 1836, assigned these men 'to range the frontier.' "

After personal bravery, the main requirements for Ranger applicants was possession of a horse, rifle, and pistols. To enforce law and make peace, the early Rangers received $1.25 per day, and for this reward they spearheaded every new settlement, they tracked down the toughest criminals, and on several occasions they pursued raiders and cattle thieves across the Rio Grande and into the sovereign country of Mexico.

Power of a Tradition

During the golden era of Western expansion, the stories and legends of Ranger exploits spread across the land and thus began the tradition which is still building. Altogether, it constitutes an invisible, intangible power which works minor miracles in tight situations.

Once, while visiting the Sheriff of Mobile, Alabama, Colonel Garrison was asked to witness the raiding of a certain saloon frequented by notorious characters. He and the Sheriff entered and suddenly the Sheriff called out, "Attention! I've got a Texas Ranger with me." All eyes turned on Colonel Garrison. "And," continued the Sheriff, "this Ranger will pump lead into any man who moves."

The Sheriff turned and departed by the nearest exit, leaving Colonel Garrison surrounded by two score ruffians. In the ensuing cold, tense moments, nothing moved, nothing happened, and seemingly the men had stopped breathing. At length, someone spoke up: "Mr. Ranger! would

you allow me to set this bottle down?"

"Sure," replied Colonel Garrison, and the suspense was broken.

"It wasn't I who scared them," he declared. "Those fellows remembered the Rangers' fighting reputation. As a matter of fact, I had neither reason nor authority to draw a gun in the State of Alabama—it's out of my jurisdiction."

The Unwritten Ranger Code

The tradition linking the Rangers' present with the past means more than tales of heroism. It gives every Ranger a pattern by which to gauge his own conduct. Of course, he is guided by the customary regulations and laws, but a violation of the unwritten Ranger code would be frowned upon by Colonel Garrison and the three unpaid commissioners who set the overall policies of the Service.

According to Colonel Garrison, the unwritten code has as much to do with successful law enforcement in Texas as the pistols which a Ranger wears on his hips.

The first commandment tells the Ranger to carry out orders by peaceful means, but when a situation demands force, *Don't back down!* When you face an opponent, don't flinch, come hell or high water.

Is this commandment perilous?

"It's definitely dangerous for the criminal," replied Colonel Garrison. He knows from past performance that the Rangers shoot straight. And if he kills a Ranger, the full power of law enforcement agencies will bear down and he will be hunted until captured."

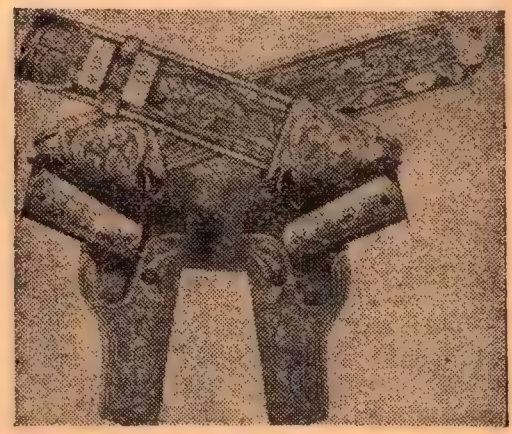
In recent years the Rangers have engaged in countless shooting melees, but not one Ranger has been killed in action during the last thirty years, an extraordinary record for a police organization whose members travel alone or in pairs. Yes, the first commandment really works.

Keep Moving!

The Rangers' second commandment is *Keep moving!* Let the enemy dread your arrival and pray for your departure. Let him guess your strength, but never doubt your resolution.

Along the Texas border, the smugglers, *banditos* and "wetbacks" (lawless elements who wade across the Rio Grande frontier in defiance of immigration and customs officers) assert there must be "thousands of Texas Rangers." Wherever one turns, and in the most surprising places, one meets a Ranger.

Be sure you're right—then go ahead. In 1944 the Sheriff of Lockhart called for help in solving the strange death of a laborer named Pablo Garcia. Texas Ranger R. M. Briggs investigated, found a few bits of red wool under the dead man's fingernails and signs of a struggle.



This two-gun rig belongs to Homer Garrison, Chief of the Texas Rangers

Garcia's fingerprints showed he had a criminal record. Most investigators would have stopped right there, but the red bits of wool suggested to Briggs that murder had been committed. His next job was to find a certain woolen garment.

Ranger Briggs followed a long trail through parts of Old and New Mexico, Oklahoma and one-quarter of the state of Texas, but within 62 days he had matched the bits of red wool with a sweater, he had arrested two of the murdered man's alleged friends, who subsequently made full confession of the crime. Motive: They had sought to cancel an old debt by liquidating the creditor.

Pride and Devotion

Don't change your identity. If you must, wear a disguise in the enemy's camp, but never forget your true allegiance and association. This invokes the Ranger's pride in his organization and devotion to duty.

Every Ranger personifies the State and acts in the name of the people.

"It is important," said Colonel Garrison, "to preserve the traditional nature of our organization. We do not believe in complicating police work with elaborate procedures and red tape. Also we dislike conventional uniforms and superfluous hardware. Every Ranger dresses according to his own taste; it worked in the frontier days and it works today.

"Any sudden change in the basic procedures and organization of the Rangers would, in our opinion, prove harmful. Some people want to 'streamline' the Ranger service with tailored uniforms and a name like 'Texas State Police.' But that single word *Ranger* is our big asset. If we standardized our clothing and changed our identity, we would have to build a new force around a new tradition. And it would be a calamity for Texas."

The next commandment calls for *Equal justice to all.* Some months ago a sheriff solicited the Rangers' help in avoiding an embarrassing situation. The Sheriff had uncovered evidence that one of the most prominent citizens in his county was engaged in common cattle-stealing. The Sheriff did not care to make the arrest—it might ruin him politically.

But the political consequences did not frighten a certain Ranger who paid a surprise visit to the suspect. For two hours they conversed in a car parked at the roadside. When the conversation ended, the Ranger had obtained a full confession of guilt.

The Rangers frequently are called to break up organized gambling in communities where local officers are victims of political pressures.

Lawbreakers Beware!

Don't pre-judge a case. Get all the evidence. In the murder of a storekeeper and the wounding of his wife by a mysterious assailant who fired a shotgun in the night, the preliminary investigation disclosed that a son had been seen threatening the old couple with death unless he was given his share of the inheritance. The murder and shooting took place the following night.

"Circumstantial evidence might have sent the son to the electric chair, but for some clues investigated by the Rangers," said Colonel Garrison.

The important clues which unlocked the mystery of this crime were two empty 20-gauge shotgun shells. After collecting every known shotgun in town the Rangers fired test shots, from which it was possible to compare tell-tale markings on the shells found at the scene of the crime. The owner of the gun happened to be a reputable hotel proprietor, but the actual crime was traced to the hotel porter who had borrowed the boss' gun to carry out his plan of robbery.

Guard the innocent and guard the guilty. This commandment recognizes an accused man's innocence until tried and found guilty.

One notable instance of how this commandment works takes us back to a riot which flared up in Beaumont, Texas, after a Negro was charged with rape by a white girl. The Negro was incarcerated in the local jail. A mob swarmed through the streets, looting and shooting recklessly. Storming the jail, they demanded the prisoner for lynching.

The local authorities were helpless, but four Rangers and Captain Hardy Purvis arrested the ring-leaders and warned the mob to desist. They did, but the toll was frightful: one killed and 289 wounded!

Subsequently the Rangers obtained a full confession from the accusing girl. She had not been raped after all. It was just a hoax!

Rangers Keep Their Word

Don't break a promise. To get the evidence on law-breakers, the Rangers solicit information from all quarters. Responsible citizens lend assistance and offer information as a civic responsibility, but much of the information needed for legal evidence is known only to criminal elements. When a Ranger induces a criminal to turn State's evidence on promise of leniency, he does not go back on his word. And the Courts of Texas have shown a strong inclination to sustain the Ranger's promise.

The written and unwritten code of the Rangers helps to make it the organization which law enforcement agencies in all parts of the world have come to observe and respect. Foreign governments have

sent officers and delegations to study the Ranger organization and its techniques of operation. Colonel Garrison lectures regularly before the F.B.I. Police Academy in Washington and before various state police organizations.

Once he was asked his opinion of a new uniform under consideration by a certain state police. The pistol was attached to a halter cord around an officer's neck.

"In my state," said Colonel Garrison, "that halter would invite some criminal to choke you to death."

In general, Colonel Garrison dislikes the brass, chromium, braid, and gadgets used as adornments by some police forces. "Those trinkets don't impress anybody," he says.

Public Servant

He also finds fault with the hard-boiled agents of law enforcement. "The belligerent cop is either a coward trying to appear tough, an egotist taking advantage of his authority, or an amateur laboring under the impression that his duty is to change human nature. The policeman is a public servant and law enforcement is his duty, not his special privilege."

In these days of carbon copies and cross files, the Rangers have learned to meet the demand of prosecution officers and crime laboratory technicians for detailed reports of field investigations. But in pioneer days, the Rangers' reports rarely described the chase or the persons involved. The sum and substance of a report merely spelled "finis" to a crime or man-hunt.

In the early 19th Century, the Rangers were known to offer a scalp as proof that a law-breaker would no longer trouble the peace. As the frontier advanced westward, the Rangers clapped prisoners into local jails and filed brief written reports, some of which can qualify as masterpieces of understatement, to wit, "All shot to pieces—but nothing serious," and "We had a battle—they lost."

The Rangers dislike ostentation and fanfare. Their deliberate modesty is a curious contradiction in a State where boasting, bragging and exaggerating surpasses anything heard in our land. Texas boosters can match any superlative in the Yankee lexicon. A politician who makes a speech without enriching the reputation of the Lone Star State in terms of "most" and "greatest" is headed for defeat. But the Rangers merit special treatment. They are termed the "smallest police force for the largest state," and thereby achieve a superlative understatement.

Friendly Officers

Despite any claim to fame, the Rangers pursue their work with cool, determined objectivity, arousing confidence in the innocent and fear in the lawless. They eschew bullying tactics and insulting remarks. In this closely knit organization, the conduct of each Ranger concerns the prestige of all.

The nub of Ranger public relations strategy is simple: Make friends with those whose lives and property you are defending. The Rangers frequently get valuable assistance from these public friends, at a tremendous saving to the taxpayers of Texas.

Far outnumbered by criminals and lawbreakers, the Rangers rely mainly on their wits, not their pistols. Fear in the human breast is still the greatest antidote to crime, and this contagious dread of the Rangers—rooted in traditions and legends—can intimidate a mob or subdue a killer.

Thus a shining symbol of law and order carries more weight in Texas than an arsenal of bullets. This may sound like hooey—actually it is the lesson learned from long experience. Around this truism the people of Texas receive the protection of an organization whose efficiency and effectiveness is acknowledged by experts at home and abroad.

Unlike police organizations around the country, the Rangers' Chief and three-man board of commissioners do not contemplate a so-called "bigger and better" force for the present or in the foreseeable future, notwithstanding the fact that the Lone Star State's population is steadily rising.

The frankest testimonials of popular appreciation and esteem appear in the many letters from ranking officials and just plain folks. But the most emphatic testimonial was expressed by members of the Legislature who, after defeating a bill to reduce the Ranger force to six for the whole State, retaliated by adding six men to the existing force, thus bringing it up

to its present strength of 50 men—44 Rangers and 6 captains.

As against such gratitude from the people of Texas, the Rangers take pride in a special compliment which Adolph Hitler's vassals broadcast during World War II.

After the famous assault on Dieppe, when it was rumored that the American Rangers were involved in the swooping commando raids, a Berlin newscaster (probably a former enemy alien prisoner in the United States) broadcast this description:

"The so-called Texas Rangers . . . keep the ranches near Mexico. They are young daredevils without military experience. We came to know them in our internment camps in West Virginia. At every corner stood day and night sentries. These were the Texas Rangers. During the cold winter months, when they were accustomed to being down south, they froze miserably, and one day four of them deserted. . . After that, heated automobiles with radios were placed at their disposal. They now sat in them and, their automatic pistols on their laps, watched us through the tightly closed windows of the cars. It was comical. . . ."

The Rangers seem to enjoy this characterization. It makes them smile.

READY AND WAITING

(Concluded from page 67)

the bank robbers went down as a bullet got him in the left leg. A second man dropped as Boyd shot him in the right leg.

At the sound of the shooting Joe Mead came running out of the saloon. Lem Carlson was close behind him. The man with the horses fired at the deputy, as he saw the badge on Mead's shirt. The bullet missed, and before the man could fire again a slug from the sheriff's rifle got him in the arm and he dropped his gun.

The fourth man was running around in circles in the center of the street, holding his arms extended above his head and squawking like a chicken. He looked so silly that the sheriff started to laugh, and he couldn't stop.

The deputy dashed across the street and up on the porch.

"You all right, Ben?" Mead asked anxiously. "Them four fellers convinced me that they didn't hardly know Lem Carlson, and that they were part of a trail herd crew headin' home. Didn't think they were anythin' to worry about."

"They shore ain't now," said the sheriff, looking at the three wounded men, who were not trying to go any place in particular. "Trail herd crew, eh." He stopped laughing. "Aw, what's the use, you don't even know it's Monday!"

"Say, I been talkin' to Carlson," said the deputy. "You know them stories around town about him buyin' up the mortgages and puttin' those ranchers out of business? Well, it ain't so. He never bought a mortgage in his life."

From the side of the hotel a horse galloped out into the street and Ed Jarrett was in the saddle. Carl Springer was sprawled on the plank walk, unable to rise because of his wounded leg. The outlaw saw Jarrett coming and raised his gun.

One shot knocked the banker out of the saddle and he was dead when he hit the street.

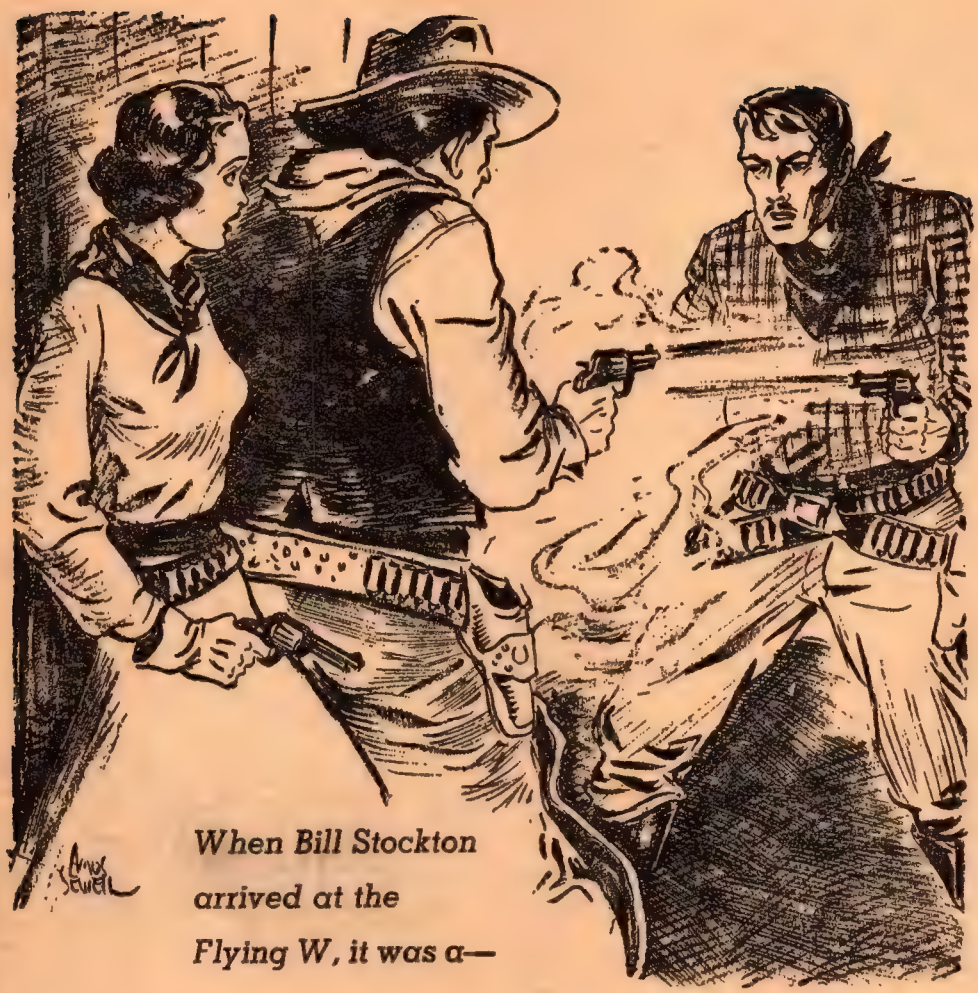
"He don't even care what day it is," Mead said as he saw what happened out in the street. "There's a banker who loved money too much."

"Right," said the sheriff. "And he'll never know I didn't even have a hideout gun under my hat. Round up the prisoners, Joe. The trouble I've been expectin' has come and gone."

COMING NEXT MONTH

SIX-GUN SOUTHPAW

***The True Story of Ranger John Hughes by* HAROLD PREECE**



When Bill Stockton arrived at the Flying W, it was a—

BAD DAY for DRYGULCHERS

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

BILL STOCKTON, wandering cowboy, and far from his own bailiwick, suddenly grew wary as he rode slowly into the Flying W ranch yard, in unfamiliar territory. A man appeared from the bunkhouse and casually seated himself on a bench with a rifle across his knees. He might or might not be intending to clean the gun. Another man appeared from the cook shack. And although he wore an apron made out of a flour bag around his waist over his range clothes, there was a gun in the holster on his right hip.

"Tell 'em I was greatly outnumbered," drawled Stockton, to no one in particular. "But I died fightin'."

From the ranchhouse porch came a soft laugh, and an auburn-haired girl who had been sitting in a big chair that half hid her rose to her feet. Plainly she had heard what Stockton had said.

She came to the porch steps and stood there watching as Bill Stockton halted his sorrel and politely raised his Stetson as he sat easily in his saddle. He was a big, dark young man wearing a flannel shirt, open vest, and batwing leather chaps over his levis.

"Strangers aren't in that much danger here—at least not yet," the girl remarked to him. "The Flying W outfit is just cautious."

"Un-huh." Stockton nodded. "It shore seems as if yuh're plumb ready for trouble. Which same I ain't bringin'. Bill Stockton is the name, and I'm just a poor wanderin' pilgrim from down Texas way."

"Light and rest your saddle, Mr. Stockton," said the girl. "I'm Sally Westfield. My dad owns this spread."

Casually Stockton glanced back at the clump of cottonwoods growing near the creek. He had circled around those trees in approaching the ranch. And at what he glimpsed there now, he went into swift action.

"Look out!" he shouted, as caught a gleam of sunlight on metal from beneath the trees. "Duck!"

The man on the bench in front of the bunkhouse hit the ground fast. The ranch cook leaped back inside the cook shack. Stockton himself slid out of saddle in a hurry.

From the cottonwoods a rifle roared and a bullet thudded into the side of the bunkhouse just above the bench where the Flying W waddy had been sitting a moment before. Instantly Stockton snatched his carbine out of the saddle-boot, snapped the gun to his shoulder and began peppering the brush at the foot of the cottonwoods with lead.

From flat on the ground in front of the bunkhouse the man there also went to work with his rifle.

"And that makes it a bad day for drygulchers," commented Stockton as he stopped firing and glanced at Sally Westfield. "Looks like you folks around here do have to be kind of slick."

"What happened?" demanded Sally anxiously. She was still dazed by the speed with which Stockton and the other men had gone gone into action. "Who were you shooting at? Who is in those trees?"

"I'd shore like to know," Bill Stockton told her, with a grin. "But I'm a stranger around here."

THE man near the bunkhouse was no longer shooting, and there were no more bullets from the cottonwoods. Evidently with so much lead flying in his direction the drygulchers had gone away from there in a hurry.

Stockton put his carbine back in the saddle-boot and led his horse over to the shady side of the house where he left the sorrel ground-hitched. Sally Westfield was waiting on the porch when he returned, and the cowboy with the rifle ran toward them.

"Who is he?" Stockton asked quickly, with a nod at the approaching waddy. "The way he joined in the fun just now suits me fine."

"That's Steve Harper," said Sally. He's been with the Flying W ever since I was a little girl."

"Which ain't so awful long ago," said Bill Stockton, grinning.

"I'm twenty-two," Sally said defensively.

"No!" He looked at her admiringly. "Yuh shore are well preserved for an old lady."

Steve Harper, a wiry little gray-haired man stopped when he reached them and took a close look at Stockton. He nodded.

"Texan, huh?" he said. "Thought so."

"Does it show that plain?" demanded the Texan in mock surprise. His eyes now were on a rider who was approaching the ranch buildings from the south. "Don't tell me that when folks speak of the map of Texas they mean my face?"

"No—no." Harper grinned broadly. "But y'see I was born in Texas, and I know the breed straight off. They act fast and have plenty of savvy. Thanks."

"For what?" asked Stockton.

"Why, 'saving' my life," the old cowhand said. "If yuh hadn't yelled when yuh did that sidewinder's bullet would downed me!"

"But why was he gunnin' for yuh asked Stockton curiously. "If Miss Westfield don't mind mebbe the three of us better talk this over."

"Of course," said Sally. "I'd like to know myself."

Stockton and Steve Harper went up on the porch with her where they dropped

into chairs and began talking earnestly. Stockton learned then that Mark Westfield was out on the range with the rest of his outfit checking up on the stock. He learned other things—among them that there were three ranches in this part of Arizona, and they controlled the region for a hundred miles around. To the south was the Bar L, owned by Ed Lowell, and to the west the Spur outfit owned by John Gill.

"With the Flying W here to the north," informed Steve Harper, "it is kind of like a triangle, with us at the top end. We all been losin' stock lately—but nobody has caught any rustlers."

The rider that Stockton had seen approaching rode up to the ranchhouse. He was a man in his late forties with a small mustache and black hair. He wore two guns in crossed gun-belts.

"Morning, Ed," Sally called to him. "Nice to see you. Come on up an join us." She glanced at Stockton. "That's Ed Lowell, who owns the Bar L," she said in a low voice.

Lowell came up on the porch. He was quite sure of himself and very much at home. He nodded to Harper and looked intently at the stranger as he was introduced. Stockton hadn't made up his mind whether or not he liked the owner of the Bar L.

"Just got back from town," Lowell told them as he sat down. "Been talkin' to the sheriff about the cattle we three ranches all have been losin'. There's trouble in town, too, Sheriff Denning told me. A lone bandit robbed the bank in Trail End day before yesterday."

"Anybody we know?" Steve Harper asked drily."

"Don't think so." Lowell looked intently at Stockton. "The robber was masked, but he was a big, dark-haired man. Wore a blue shirt, dark vest—"

"And batwing leather chaps?" interrupted Stockton coldly.

"Of course not." Lowell laughed. "A man robbing a bank would be a fool to wear chaps. Too stiff and awkward." A thought appeared to strike the owner of the Bar L. "Oh, I see what yuh're gettin' at, Stockton. That description does sound a good bit like you, don't it?"

"There are lots of big, dark-haired men," Sally said quickly, before Stockton could speak. "I'm sure it wasn't Bill, here."

STOCKTON was startled—and pleased. The way Sally casually called him by his first name made it sound as if they were old friends. He smiled as he saw Lowell frown.

"I haven't robbed any banks lately," he drawled, as he got to his feet. "It's been nice seein' yuh, Sally. Reckon I'll ride out and have a talk with Mark and the boys."

"What about the dry—" began Harper, and then broke off and lapsed into painful silence, for Stockton had stepped on his foot.

"Don't believe we need worry about a dry spell this summer," Stockton commented with a shrug as he moved down the porch steps. "Be seein' yuh around, Lowell. Comin', Steve?"

"Huh?" said Harper. "Oh, shore. Right with yuh, Bill."

The little old cowboy followed Stockton off the porch. Stockton's eyes were taking in Lowell's bay horse that was standing ground-hitched near the porch. There was a worn place on the saddle just in front of the left fender.

Harper caught up with Stockton just as the big man from Texas reached his own horse and swung into saddle. They were some distance from the man and the girl still sitting on the porch, and their voices could not be heard.

"Stay around and sort of keep guard on Miss Sally," Stockton told old Steve grimly. "And while yuh're doin't it try and figger out a reason for Lowell wantin' to kill yuh."

"Huh?" yipped Harper blankly. "Yuh think *he's* the drygulcher?"

"Could be,' said Stockton. "I ain't overlookin' any bets." He smiled down at the little cowboy. "I'm goin' to look for a rifle that Lowell usually carries on his saddle, and is missin' now."

He rode off, and Steve Harper looked after him with a puzzled frown.

"Just because we both come from Texas," muttered Steve, "that hombre expects me to have too much savvy!"

It had rained the previous night, and the ground was still fairly soft, so Stockton had little trouble in following Ed Lowell's back trail. The hoofprints of the

big bay were clear.

The rancher had come from the south, then circled around to reach the Flying W from the west. His route had taken him to the cottonwoods by the creek, then away again.

"Now if a man owns a good saddle gun," ruminated Stockton, "and he don't want it with him when he shows up at the Flyin' W, what does he do with it? He's not goin' to be fool enough to throw it away. No sir. He's probably goin' to find a place to cache it, where he can find it easy."

Not far from the creek an opening in the side of an old dead tree caught Stockton's glance. He rode closer and dismounted. Reached into the hollow tree he drew out a carbine carefully wrapped in a slicker. As he opened the bundle to examine the short-barreled rifle a packet of new ten-dollar bills had been wrapped with the gun tumbled out—and on the paper that held the bills stacked was printed "$500."

"Ain't that somethin'!" muttered the Texan, staring at the money. "I went huntin' for a rabbit and caught me a bear."

A little black book had also been carelessly left in the slicker. Stockton thumbed through the pages. It was a list of Lowell's expenses and cash on hand. Apparently the owner of the Bar L had been much in debt for the past six months.

"A feller needin' money that bad might start doin' some rustlin'," Stockton thought, his lips tight. "Reckon he'd be able to change the brand on the stolen stuff and ship and sell it as his own stock —with some of his own cattle thrown in. But if he got right hard pressed, then he would be liable to rob a bank. But why in tarnation would he try to down Steve Harper?"

Bill Stockton rolled up the slicker, with the gun and the money and the black book inside it. With the bundle tied to his saddle he headed back to the Flying W.

Lowell's bay was still in front of the ranchhouse porch, but the rancher and the girl were no longer in sight. Stockton dismounted and left his sorrel close to the bay. The yellow slicker hanging on his saddle was clearly visible to anyone looking out the front windows.

Going quietly up the steps of the porch, the man from Texas entered the house through the open front door. From the living room he heard voices, and as he advanced the words came clearly.

"But yuh've got to agree to marry me this time, Sally!" Lowell was saying earnestly. "You know how often I've asked yuh before—and yuh've just laughed at me. Now I expect yuh to be serious about it. If there was anybody else yuh was in love with I'd understand—but there aint."

"Oh, yes, there is!" Sally said nervously. "Of course there's someone else, Ed."

"Then name him," said Lowell curtly.

"Why—why, it's Bill Stockton," Sally said quickly. "I hadn't seen him for some time until today. We met when I was visiting my uncle down in Texas."

"Stop lyin'," snapped Lowell. "Yuh never saw that bank robber before in yore life!'

"Keep away from me, or I'll shoot!" Sally cried wildly.

BILL STOCKTON stepped into the living room. Sally was covering Ed Lowell with a small gun. Stockton stepped in front of her and faced the owner of the Bar L.

"I've got yore slicker and everything in it hangin' out on my saddle, Lowell," Stockton said coldly. "I don't reckon Sally wants to marry yuh."

Lowell cursed and his hand jarred out the gun in the holster on his left side. Stockton's hand flashed to his own Colt. Both guns roared at the same instant. Stockton felt a stab of searing pain as Lowell's bullet deeply creased the upper part of his left arm. His own slug had plowed into the rancher's right shoulder.

"Should have shot straighter when I tried to down yuh from the cottonwoods!" Lowell shouted angrily as his gun dropped from his fingers. "Figgered yuh for a lawman and trailed yuh here."

"I'm turning yuh over to the sheriff for rustlin' and bank robbery, Lowell," Stockton said grimly. He was still covering the Bar L owner with his gun. "That stuff in yore slicker is plenty of evidence against yuh."

Steve Harper and the ranch cook who had heard the shots came rushing into the house, their own guns in readiness.

"Hitch up a light wagon, Steve," ordered Stockton. "We're takin' Ed Lowell into

town to the doctor and the sheriff."

"Did yuh find out why he was tryin' to kill me?" asked Harper. "I ain't been able to think of a reason."

"He wasn't aimin' to down you,' Stockton told him. "He was trying to down me. Figgered I was a lawman." Stockton grinned. "And by gravy, he was right. I'm the Cattlemen's Association detective that Mark Westfield asked be sent here to clean up the rustlin'. Since Lowell has been stealin' stock and robbed the bank, too, I reckon things are pretty well cleaned up. And I haven't even seen Mark Westfield yet."

"Huh?" said Steve Harper blankly.

"Lets get goin'," Stockton said impatiantly. "I've got to hurry back here and talk to Sally about a hombre she met down in Texas."

"Huh?" said Sally, but she was smiling softly.

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LONG SAM LENDS A HAND

"Sorta off your home range, aren't you, Ike?" drawled Long Sam

Littlejohn takes a trouble trail to foil a range plot!

by LEE BOND

SOME time during the hot, black night that was now fading into gray dawn the weariness in Long Sam Littlejohn had gone beyond physical agony. He was simply numb now—numb of mind and body. Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn knew full well the danger of riding down this open trail through the Texas dawn in his present condition.

But stopping was out of the question. Somewhere on his back-trail came derby-wearing, cigar-chewing Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin.

Long Sam sighed heavily, pulled some

of the slump out of his gaunt, unusually tall body. A narrow, timber-choked valley lay before him now. Shadows still clung in thick folds, however, and he could see no distinguishing landmarks.

"But this would be Hominy Creek," he said aloud. "Twenty miles, at least, to the first fringes of the thickets of pear and tornillo down along the Rio! Reckon you can keep goin' until we get to those thickets, Sleeper?"

Long Sam shook his yellow-thatched head slowly, blood-shot eyes studying the gloomy timber around him. Sleeper was far more weary than he had realized. The tough old roan might last another hour, with careful handling. But he could never make it to the safety of those towering, thorn-armored thickets down along the Rio Grande without first resting and grazing.

"It's only five miles, about, straight down this Hominy Creek valley to the head of Comanche Basin, where Dave Benton's Circle B range lays," Long Sam groaned. "We could make it down there, easy. Only that sawed-off Fry hellion knows Dave Benton and me are friends, and will go larrupin' to the Circle B to see if we went there."

Long Sam reined in at the ford, swung stiffly out of the hand-tooled black saddle on Sleeper's back, and let the roan drink. The outlaw stretched out on the gravely shore, filled his own empty stomach with the cool water. Then taking off his black Stetson he ducked his yellow-thatched head into the water, feeling the chill of it sting life into his weary body. He was drying his gaunt face and dripping hair on a blue bandanna when he heard a rider coming in from the south, pushing his horse down the slope at a reckless pace.

Long Sam jumped to his feet, tugged his Stetson on over wet hair, and stepped into Sleeper's saddle. He turned the roan off into the timber, riding downstream at a careful walk. Full daylight had come now, yet there were black shadows here beneath the live oak and sycamores along the stream.

"Likely just some cowhand," the outlaw muttered. "But a bounty-plastered galoot like me can't take things like that for granted."

The rider was off the slope now, the rich loam of the creek bottom deadening the sounds of his mount's hoofs to muffled thumping. Long Sam canted his head, grinning a little when he thought of the splashing that running horse would do when it hit Hominy Creek ford. Only there was no splashing. About the time the horse should have hit the water, all sounds in the valley ceased. "What in thunder!" Long Sam muttered.

The outlaw fidgeted, wishing he had ridden further down the creek. He was only fifty yards or so from the ford, although he could not see the trail nor the crossing for the thick timber. From boots to flat-crowned Stetson he had dressed in jetty black, and knew that he would be hard to spot, here in the thick shadows. But his bony hands slid down, wrapped around the black butts of a pair of matched .45s as he waited.

LONG SAM suddenly stiffened with new uneasiness. Another rider was coming toward Hominy Creek now, riding down the same slope Long Sam had come down, only a few moments earlier. And the rider was coming at a reckless pace, too!

Again Long Sam began listening for the roaring splash of a running horse hitting the ford. And it came this time, along with the nervous snorting of a high-strung horse, and the startled cursing of a man who had taken more of a ducking than he wanted.

Then a rifle threw a single, ringing shot into the morning quiet, and Long Sam Littlejohn heard the sodden slap of the bullet as it struck some yielding thing. He heard, too, the strangled cry of a man hard hit, and suddenly Littlejohn was running up through the shadowy timber.

But Long Sam was not crowding his luck too hard. He slowed down, advancing at a walk. Then he could see the ford, and his bloodshot eyes were narrow, red slots as he watched a stocky, round-faced man brace sturdy legs and hang desperately to the bridle reins of a tall, sorrel gelding that was trying to break away from him. And there on the edge of Hominy Creek, face down in the shallow water, lay another man.

"A bushwhackin', sure as thunder!" Long Sam droned. "And the gent out there tryin' to hang onto that sorrel is Ike

Lufkin, or I miss a guess. The way Ike keeps gogglin' at the saddlebags behind that sorrel's saddle likely explains why he bushwhacked that gent, too!"

Long Sam slid over a bank, eased down into knee-deep water, and waded Hominy Creek. He crawled up into the bottom on the far side, moving in behind a fringe of brush, his eyes alert. Ike Lufkin had the sorrel quieted down, and was frantically unfastening the saddle bags.

"Come to papa!" Lufkin chortled as he got the saddlebags loose.

HE KICKED the sorrel in the belly, laughed when it leaped away. Then Lufkin squatted on his heels, ripped the saddlebags open in nervous haste, and began laughing in a strange hacking sound as he dug out packets of paper money.

"Six bundles, and thirty thousand dollars, cold cash!" Lufkin almost shouted. "South America, here I come."

"How about takin' a little side trip to hell, Ike?" Long Sam Littlejohn's voice was like a dull file, scraping over hard metal.

Ike Lufkin spilled the packets of money to the ground, jerking up and around in a single, violent movement. His blocky hands flung down to the butts of holstered pistols, but stopped short of the walnut grips.

"Long Sam Littlejohn, by thunder!" he hollered.

"Sorta off yore home range, aren't yuh, Ike?" Long Sam drawled.

"What do yuh mean by that?" Lufkin countered, glancing around uneasily.

"Last account I had, you and Bob Pardee and Bill Rankin had a hideout over yonder in the Anacaho Mountains some place, and were tryin' to build yoreselves a tough rep as stage robbers," Long Sam snorted.

"Me and Bill Rankin and Bob Pardee quit the stage line—uh—business two years ago!" Lufkin grunted. "We come over here to give Jay Simpson a hand with his Rockin' S outfit."

"Jay Simpson?" Long Sam shook his head. "I never heard of him or his Rockin' S."

"Jay Simpson's Rockin' S covers the upper half of Comanche Basin," Lufkin scowled.

"Comanche Basin has belonged to old Dave Benton since I can remember!" Long Sam snapped. "Dave's Circle B cattle are the only critters that ever grazed there."

"Old Dave Benton run into some hard luck, right here at this ford, more than two years ago!" Lufkin grunted. "He was comin' back from Kansas with forty thousand dollars, cash money, in his jeans when some feller up and twisted a rifle bullet through him for the beef money he was packin'. After that, the Circle B went to pot."

"What about Dave's family?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"Benton's wife was ailin' when he was killed, and died a couple of months later," Lufkin said glowering. "Young Pete Benton then had taken charge of the Circle B, and whooped off what cash money his daddy had left in the Cricket bank."

"What about Kate Benton, Pete's sister?" Long Sam growled. "She's a few years older than Pete, and level-headed as they come. Couldn't Kate keep that fool Pete from wreckin' the Circle B?"

"A court give Pete full say-so!" Lufkin snorted. "If Kate has ary grain of sense in that purty head of hers, she'll go ahead and marry up with Jay Simpson. Now that Pete ain't under foot to keep her faunchin', she may do it, too."

"Somethin' happened to young Pete?" Long Sam barked the question harshly.

Ike Lufkin paled, his stock body suddenly stiff. He jerked thick lips into a hard line, obviously intending to say nothing. But his pale eyes swiveled in their sockets, touched the dead man lying there in the water at the ford.

"Yuh've murdered young Pete Benton!" Long Sam said slowly.

"I killed Pete Benton!" Ike Lufkin said flatly. "Here at my feet is thirty thousand dollars, cash money, Littlejohn. I'm pickin' that money up, and headin' for South America with it."

"Yuh're in this on your lonesome, Ike?" Long Sam asked slowly.

"On my lonesome!" Lufkin grinned crookedly. "Jay Simpson and Bill Rankin are playin' it cautious, takin' their sweet time about settin' out to make the kind of money they could be makin'. Bob Pardee sees eye to eye with them, too. But me, I ain't a patient man. When

Jay Simpson let that swaggerin' Pete Benton ramrod a pool herd up to the Kansas market, I seen a chance to make the South America stake I've been honin' for. So I'll pick up the marbles and be movin' down to—Hey, Pete's movin'!"

Thinking it over afterward, Long Sam Littlejohn knew that only his fatigue-dulled mind caused him to fall for such a stunt. But he did fall for it, jerking half around, eyes whipping to Pete Benton's body there in the edge of the water. He heard Ike Lufkin's jolting laughter then, and knew that he had been tricked. But Lufkin's guns were out, the thundering of their shots filling the narrow valley.

Long Sam flipped his own sixes from holsters, his thumbs raking back spiked hammers as he whirled. A bullet burnt a blister on the right side of his neck, another stung the top of his left shoulder lightly, and a third gashed the tip of his right shoulder. Long Sam's left hand six-shooter blasted then, and that was the only shot he fired. He stood there, humming a doleful range dirge, watching Ike Lufkin pitch down, eyes bugged out in terror as he threw away smoking guns and clamped both hands to a bloody spot on the front of his shirt.

"Sam, pull these boots off my feet!" Lufkin gasped.

"Why?" the gaunt outlaw countered.

"You're slug skewered me — went plumb through!" Lufkin panted.

"I know that," Long Sam shrugged.

He holstered his right hand Colt, then reloaded the spent chamber in the other gun and holstered it. He walked over, kicked Ike Lufkin's six-shooters into the creek, then squatted on his heels, picked up the six neatly bound packets of paper money, and shoved them inside the front of his shirt. Ike Lufkin started to protest, but choked, rolled over on his side, and coughed up a mouth full of blood.

"My boots, Littlejohn!" he croaked. "Get 'em off. When I was just a button, back in my home town, a snivelin' preacher told me I'd die with my boots on, unless I changed my ways. I want to make a liar out of that skypilot, Sam."

"What I ought to do is kick your ribs in while yuh can still feel it!" Long Sam said coldly. "How do yuh think I like the chore of goin' to Kate Benton and tellin' her about young Pete, yuh murderin' son?"

"Kate'll be plumb happy to know what happened to that swaggerin', loud-mouthed fool!" Ike Lufkin croaked.

"What in blazes are you talkin' about?" Long Sam snapped.

Lufkin started to say something, but suddenly his face twisted, and his head jerked down. He coughed hard for a moment, then stretched out on his side, growing silent. Long Sam shook him, then pushed him over on his back. The gaunt outlaw stood up slowly. Ike Lufkin had not made a liar out of that preacher back in his home town, after all.

"Joe Fry will land a-straddle of me if I don't watch out," Long Sam sighed wearily.

He shuddered, dreading the task of breaking the news of her brother's violent death to Kate Benton. He sent Sleeper down the creek at a walk, the dread in him growing as he followed the stream's crooked course through the hills to the upper end of the vast, bowl-shaped range known locally as Comanche Basin.

He swung west at the basin's head, keeping in thick pine timber back of the rimrock until he was directly above the sprawling log house, barns, sheds and corrals old Dave Benton had built, many years ago. The gaunt outlaw crossed the open strip of rimrock as rapidly as he could, heaving a sigh of relief when he was again riding in timber along the slope that pitched steeply down to the Circle B buildings.

"If I had my druthers, I'd sure druther take a beatin' than tell Kate what I've got to tell her," Long Sam muttered uneasily.

As he drew closer, he saw that the Circle B had run down considerably, but was not exactly dilapidated yet. Long Sam saw no one around the barns or corrals, yet smoke trickled lazily from the kitchen chimney at the ranch house. He was on the point of riding boldly into the open when he saw three riders.

"Blazes!" he growled, halting. "Another second, and I'd have popped out in front of those three."

RIDERS were swinging in across a broad meadow, evidently having come down the basin along Hominy Creek, where the timber was heavy. As

he drew closer to the back of the ranch house, Long Sam's bloodshot eyes were suddenly sparked with grim lights, for two of those men were hawk-nosed Bill Rankin and scrawny, red-headed little Bob Pardee. The third rider was big, heavily built, and wore expensive clothes that were a little too flashy.

"Jay Simpson, I'd bet," Long Sam droned, studying the big man who rode between Bill Rankin and Bob Pardee.

The three horsemen rode into the back yard at the Circle B ranch house, halting when the rear door swung open. Long Sam saw Kate Benton come out the door and down broad, stone steps, halting on the bottom one. She waited there, tall and lovely, the morning sun striking soft glints in her rich, brown hair.

"Blamed if Kate hasn't grown into a beauty," Long Sam mused.

The three men before the girl touched their hats respectfully. Then the big gent Long Sam guessed to be Jay Simpson swung off his horse. He walked toward the girl, lifting a huge hand as if he aimed to take hold of her arm. Kate retreated to the top step, her bright head lifted defiantly.

Long Sam eased a six-shooter out of leather, and got set to blister Mr. Big's south end with a bullet, in case he lunged up the steps after Kate. But the big fellow heeled around suddenly, swung aboard his horse, and led his two companions out of the yard and south along a road that ran to Cricket, eventually.

"Kate's evidently home alone," Long Sam mused as he holstered his gun.

He waited patiently until the three departing riders were out of sight, then rode forward. Kate Benton had gone back indoors, but at the sound of approaching hoofs she appeared again, dark gray eyes widening. Long Sam saw her full, red lips part, saw recognition in her eyes as she came flying down the steps. He stepped off his horse, pulled his hat off with his left hand, and offered his right hand in greeting.

"Sam Littlejohn!" Kate cried. "Oh, gollies, am I glad to see you, Sam!"

She ignored his proffered hand, rushed in like a frightened child going to a protective parent, and put slim but surprisingly strong arms around his gaunt shoulders, gripping hard. Long Sam swallowed uneasily, patted clumsily at Kate's slim shoulder. She was trembling, and he heard her stifle a sob as she clung tightly to him. Then she was stepping back, grinning crookedly up at him as she wiped tears from her cheeks.

"Sorry, Sam," she said huskily. "I can generally hang and rattle, as Dad used to put it, without letting my emotions get out of hand. But seeing you ride up here, when I need the presence of a real friend worse than—Sam, you've been hurt!"

Kate's voice ended on a startled cry. Long Sam saw her studying the blood stains on top of his left shoulder and on the shirt sleeve at the top of his right shoulder, where Ike Lufkin's bullets had nicked his skin.

"Bullet wounds!" she said sharply. "And just look at poor old Sleeper. What have you done to him, Sam?"

"I've about run the old boy into the ground, that's sure," the outlaw sighed. "Joe Fry is hot on my trail, Kate. I'll have to sift, and pronto. But first—"

His throat choked up, and he squirmed, wanting to tell Kate about young Pete, yet finding it hard to begin the telling.

"Sam, you're out on your feet!" Kate said sharply. "Into the house with you, now. There's coffee on the stove, and it's still hot."

"Kate, listen to me!" he protested. "Joe Fry is on my heels, I tell you. I've got to get out of here, and quick."

"Sleeper couldn't run a half mile, and you know it," the girl retorted. "But I have a Morgan stallion in a box stall, out at the barn, that can outrun any horse in this country. Inside, and get some coffee, while I put Sleeper on oats, and put your gear on Big Red."

Long Sam muttered under his breath as he went up the steps and into the big kitchen he had known for many years. He reckoned that he was a coward for not just blurting out the news about young Pete, then riding on. But he guessed the jolt would be hard enough for Kate to bear, at best, and began trying to figure out the easiest way to break the news as he found cup and saucer, then sank wearily down at a table with the coffee pot he had lifted from the stove.

Long Sam filled his cup, and downed the stout black brew without stopping for

breath. He filled the cup again, unbuttoned the front of his shirt, and pulled out the six packets of money. Long Sam was sitting there, finishing his third cup of coffee, when Kate came in the back door, her face flushed from hurrying.

"Sorry I was so long," she smiled.

She came across the room, still smiling. She stopped by the gaunt outlaw's chair, and stood looking down at the packets of money on the table. She was not smiling now. She looked at Long Sam quickly, a startled something in her eyes. Then she turned, and would have moved away if he had not touched her arm.

"You don't aim to question me about that money?" he asked gravely.

"There's a lot of money there, Sam," Kate Benton said gravely. "But where you got it happens to be your business."

"I'm a dog-goned coward, Kate!" Long Sam burst out. "I've been stallin' and fumblin' around, puttin' off tellin' you somethin'. But the tellin' will hurt you, and I hate like blazes to do that to you."

"I've weathered some pretty rough going since you were here the last time, Sam," the girl said gravely. "Did you know that Mother and Dad are both gone?"

Long Sam came to his feet, ran nervous fingers through his unruly yellow hair.

"I just heard about yore folks this mornin', and can't tell yuh how sorry I am, Kate," he said gravely. "And now I've got to hand yuh another load of grief, little lady. It's Pete, this time."

Kate tensed, and something came to life in her eyes that made the gaunt outlaw step back hastily. The girl laughed then, and the sound was so cold Long Sam felt a chill go down his spine.

"Don't tell me something has really happened to that rotten, unprincipled devil, Sam!" Kate cried sharply.

Long Sam brushed trembling fingers across his weary eyes, remembering the remark Ike Lufkin had made to the effect that Kate would be glad to know that Pete was dead. Speaking slowly, Long Sam told Kate what had taken place at the ford on upper Hominy Creek.

SOMETHING in the girl's burning eyes made him squirm constantly, and he could feel sweat trickling along his stubbled cheeks and jaws by the time he finished the tale.

"The money, there, is what I picked up after I'd shot Lufkin, Kate," he finished, hoarsely. "Who owned the cattle Pete took to market?"

"By any sane judgment, I owned those cattle," Kate said harshly. "A thousand head of them wore Jay Simpson's Rocking S brand, however. Five hundred head of them wore the Circle B iron. Since a court ruled that Pete, being a man, should have full sayso at running this place, perhaps I should say that those five hundred belonged to that murdering, underhanded little rake. But all those cattle—"

"Stop it, Kate!" Long Sam cut in harshly. "Accordin' to things Ike Lufkin said before he died, I gathered that Pete had been givin' yuh trouble. What in thunderation had the boy done that made yuh so bitter toward him?"

"Pete murdered my father, Sam!" Kate said harshly. "He murdered him in the same cowardly, cold-blooded way you say Pete got it himself, and right at the very same spot, too!"

"Jumpin' Judas!" Long Sam gulped. "Girl, do you know what yuh're sayin'?"

"I certainly do know what I'm saying, Sam!" Kate told him grimly. "Mother was ill, at the time. Daddy took a big herd of cattle to the Kansas market. He was returning, with forty thousand dollars, cash. He meant to take Mother to Southern California, where doctors felt certain she would regain her health. But Pete met Dad up there at the Hominy Creek ford, shot him down in cold blood, and took that money."

"If you know that your brother did a thing like that, Kate, why wasn't he arrested?" Long Sam asked, and had trouble keeping his voice steady.

"Knowing something is one thing, proving it is something else, Sam," Kate replied steadily. "And stop calling that sneaking, murdering Pete my brother. He was not, thank heavens, even remotely related to me."

"What's that?" Long Sam asked sharply. "You claim Pete wasn't your brother?"

"He was not!" Kate said firmly. "Pete's percentage gal mother and tinhorn gambler father deserted him at Cricket, when he was only a month old. Mother

and Daddy heard of the affair, took pity on the waif, and adopted Pete. I was almost six years old at the time, and remember the whole affair, quite well."

"Judas!" Long Sam said and scowled. "And Pete knew about that?"

"Yes," Kate nodded. "Some busybody told Pete about it when Pete was only ten or twelve years old. Daddy claimed that was why Pete turned into a scoundrel."

"Pete was around fourteen or fifteen, the last time I was here," Long Sam frowned. "He seemed cocky and pretty full of swagger, but I remember your dad only laughed about it, and said Pete would grow up, in time."

"My deepest regret is that Pete did not get his rotten heart shot out, years sooner!" Kate haid harshly. "If he had, my mother and father would both be alive today. And learning of his parentage had nothing to do with his rottenness, regardless of what poor Dad thought. Pete was cheap and low and mean, and all of it was there before he heard any tales of his mother and father. I know, because I grew up with that sneaking little hound."

"Couldn't yuh get yore father to see through Pete?" Long Sam asked gravely.

"If you only knew how hard I tried!" the girl said wearily.

"Your father wouldn't even listen?" the outlaw asked.

"Dad pretended to believe that I was just letting my imagination get out of hand," Kate said, and shrugged. "He told me that he would prove to me that Pete was absolutely honest and trustworthy by telling Pete where and when to meet him on his return with that forty thousand dollars' beef money."

"You knew where and when they were to meet?" Long Sam asked quickly.

"I did not!" Kate said tensely. "I begged Dad to let me know, telling him I was afraid of what Pete might do. Dad refused to tell me a thing, saying that would not be fair to Pete. I watched Pete closely, intending to follow him when he went to keep the rendezvous. But Pete sneaked away during a hard storm one night, and I did not see the murdering hound again until he returned, late the following day, and said he had found Dad dead at the Hominy Creek ford."

"Did Pete go on any sprees, or seem to have an unusual amount of cash after that?" Long Sam asked quickly.

"Pete did not get a hundred yards from this house for over four months after murdering my father!" Kate said gravely. "He was so nervous he would jump a foot off the floor if anyone made a noise behind him. And during that time, Jay Simpson, who was just a shady stock buyer and tinhorn gambler hanging around Cricket, then, would ride out here to the ranch about every day. Pete and Jay Simpson would get off to themselves and go into a huddle, and after those visits Pete would be pale and shaken for several hours."

"Jay Simpson had the deadwood on Pete!" Long Sam said sharply.

"Obviously," Kate agreed. "I think Jay Simpson blackmailed Pete, made him hand over every cent he stole when he murdered Dad. At any rate, Jay Simpson suddenly opened two fine saloons in Cricket. Then Jay bought half the Circle B range, and half the Circle B cattle, from Pete."

"Simpson had the deadwood on that murderin' little whelp, no question of that," Long Sam said angrily. "How much did this Simpson buzzard pay for half this ranch, anyhow?"

"He paid nothing more than a promise to keep Pete's neck out of a noose, unless I'm badly mistaken," Kate spread slim hands.

"But good grief, Kate!" Long Sam growled. "Yuh'd be half owner of this ranch, and would have a say in the sellin' of any part of the range or stock, wouldn't yuh?"

"I thought of it that way, too," the girl said soberly. "Pete threw a fit every time I asked him what kind of a deal he had made with Jay Simpson. I finally went to court, asking that Pete give a full account of that deal, and that I be given a full fifty-fifty say in the management of the ranch."

"The court ruled against you?" Long Sam asked incredulously.

"Jay Simpson imported a fast-talking lawyer from Houston to represent Pete, and they made a fool of me!" Kate said bitterly. "A stuffy little judge ended up telling me to stick to cooking, sewing and housekeeping, and declared that Pete was

the head of the family, being the only living male, and ruled that Pete should be free to handle the ranch affairs as he saw fit."

"I've good cause to know how infernally blind justice can be at times, Kate," Long Sam said gravely. "Because I fought the carpet baggers who seized control of Texas right after the war, I've been branded outlaw ever since, and there's still a bounty on my hide. But bein' bitter over such raw deals don't help. Forget Pete, and as much of the heartache he caused yuh as yuh possibly can. This is still a good ranch, Kate. And maybe we can jolt this Simpson cuss loose from the part of it he claims."

"I wish I could get Jay Simpson out of this basin!" Kate said tightly. "Poor Dad spent many hard years, building this Circle B into what it was at his death. Do you suppose there might be some way I could legally oust Jay Simpson?"

"I don't know about the legal part of it," Long Sam said flatly. "But this Jay Simpson is evidently a crook at heart, if not in practice. Soon as I can shake Joe Fry off my trail, I'll poke back up here. Jay Simpson got half the Circle B range and cattle by shieldin' a murderer, meanin' Pete. The right kind of pressure, put in the right place, might—

"Jay!" Kate Benton screamed.

LONG SAM whirled, hands slapping pistol butts as he followed the terrified girl's line of vision. The burly man he had seen ride up to the ranch earlier, in company with Bob Pardee and Bill Rankin, was standing in the back door, a six-shooter clutched in one big fist. Long Sam reluctantly let his own hands slide away from gun butts.

"Jay Simpson, how long have you been snooping outside that door?" Kate asked angrily.

"Quite a spell, young lady!" the big man said.

Simpson jiggled the six-shooter warningly at Long Sam, then eased on into the kitchen, his big shoulders hunched. There was an odd pallor beneath the coarse, dark skin of his face, and Long Sam felt the impact of jetty eyes that were perking nervously in their deep

[Turn page]

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sockets. Simpson licked thick lips, looked at the money on the table, then at Kate, and finally at Long Sam.

"Bill!" Jay Simpson called. "You and Bob get in here!"

Lanky, hawk-nosed Bill Rankin came through the door first, agate eyes burning coldly as he stepped sidewise, letting scrawny, pinch faced little Bob Pardee slide into the room. They each had a gun out of leather, but let the pistols dangle down, holding them carelessly as they glanced at Long Sam.

"Ain't seen you in quite a spell, Sam," Bill Rankin said dryly. "Was yuh bullin', about shootin' Ike?"

"If yuh wasn't, yuh'll wish yuh had been!" scrawny Bob Pardee said acidly. "Or had yuh forgot that Ike and Bill and me was pals?"

"Rememberin' you two second-rate chicken thieves wouldn't have worried me any," Long Sam snorted.

"Littlejohn, is Pete Benton actually dead?" Jay Simpson asked, and there was a strange sound of terror in his voice as he spoke.

"As dead as a human bein' can ever be," Long Sam said bluntly.

The pallor spread under Simpson's coarse skin. Sweat came down his face in greasy streaks now, and he was breathing in quick, shallow gasps, his jumpy eyes glazed.

"The snivelin', yellow-spined little fool!" Simpson croaked. "I eased up on him, afraid to crowd him too hard, for fear he would break, gabble everything he knew, under Kate's constant pickin' at him. Now he's dead, and I'm stuck with a paper that ain't worth the ink—"

He broke off, jerked a hand across his sweating face. He licked thick lips, touched Kate's tense face with a jumpy glance, then looked at Bill Rankin and Bob Pardee.

"Cut up a saddle rope, and tie these two!" he said harshly.

"What's the sense in gettin' ourselves into trouble by takin' Kate a prisoner?" Bill Rankin scowled. "Yonder's yore beef money, on that table. Kate ain't done nothin', has she?"

"You infernal fools!" Simpson roared at his hirelings. "That blasted paper I hold on the upper half of this basin expired three days ago. Now that Pete's dead, and can't sign a new option, I'm out on my ear, unless Kate can be made to put her own name on a piece of paper!"

"Option?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"That crawlin', whinin' Pete!" Simpson glared at him. "He was so scared I was afraid to make him actually transfer title to the land and cattle I got off him. We've been runnin' an option, which looked better, anyway, in case Kate started some more of her court nonsense."

"I'll be darned!" Long Sam chuckled. "Well, what are yuh waitin' for, Kate? Tell this big baboon to be off your land in twenty-four hours. And warn him that he's not to take any kind of livestock except his own private horse with him."

"You're crowin' a little soon, feller!" Bob Pardee glared at Long Sam. "If the boss says we've got to get you and the gal out of here or lose our taw in this basin, then—hey, watch out!"

Bob Pardee's voice ended on a shrill howl of alarm. Jay Simpson had suddenly reached out his free left hand, seized Kate Benton's slim arm, and tried to yank her toward the kitchen doorway. But the big tough found himself hold of a wildcat instead of the frightened girl he had expected to yank around. Kate slammed a slim fist full into his mouth, then raked sharp nails down his startled face in rapid strokes as he bawled in pain and backed away. And while Bob Pardee and Bill Rankin were hopping out of the way of their crawfishing boss, Long Sam Littlejohn's bony hands streaked out, sprung his guns from holsters, and started those guns smoking.

Bill Rankin wallowed back against the wall, white to the lips, eyes goggling at a torn, bloody thing that had been his gun hand. Bob Pardee ducked toward the big kitchen range, cursing furiously as he ran. He slanted his gun back and blasted a shot at Long Sam, who winced as the bullet ripped a gash across his right cheek. Long Sam's twin guns spoke in unison, and Bob Pardee flopped over into the big wood box, blood spilling from his sagging mouth.

"Sam, help!" Kate's voice was a shrill wail.

But Long Sam had already seen Jay Simpson shove her spinning, then whirl

and dash for the back door. Long Sam leaped after Simpson but yelled in a startled way, skidded all the way to the back door on plowing boot heels. Just as Jay Simpson started out the back door, at full stride, a stocky, derby-hatted man with a frayed cigar clutched in a bulldog jaw, and a six-shooter in one blocky fist, was starting in the door.

"Joe Fry!" Kate gasped, grabbing Long Sam's arm. "This way, Sam. Out the front. Your saddle is already on Big Red."

But Long Sam did not run. He was suddenly laughing, watching Joe Fry and Jay Simpson smash solidly together, then crash down into the yard, cursing and flailing each other with swinging six-shooters. Long Sam jumped out into the yard just as Jay Simpson smashed the top of the deputy marshal's derby in with a swinging gun barrel.

Fry went limp, and Simpson reared up, face purple with rage as he tried to line his gun on Long Sam. But the gaunt outlaw was watching for that. He plunged in, laid the barrel of his right hand Colt solidly across Jay Simpson's skull, then stepped back, grinning as Kate ran to him, her eyes shining.

"Now, Sam!" she cried. "Get out of here, before Fry regains his wits. Hurry!"

"And leave yuh with this mess on yore hands?" Long Sam chuckled. "Not much, little lady. Besides, I want to fix this Fry runt so's he won't be crowdin' me when I do leave."

Long Sam walked over to the deputy marshal, squatted down, and began searching him. He found what he sought —a pair of shiny steel handcuffs. He rolled Joe Fry over beside big Jay Simpson, linked Fry's right wrist to Simpson's left, then took the handcuff keys out of Fry's pocket and put them in his own pocket.

"Go saddle yoreself a horse, Kate, and head for Cricket," he grinned wearily, getting to his feet. "Tell Sheriff Mort Hinkey what's happened out here, and fetch him back to take charge."

"And you, Sam?" the girl asked uneasily.

"I'll bandage Bill Rankin's ruined

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hand, and drag what's left of Bob Pardee outside," the outlaw shrugged. "I'll also hunker down out here and have me some fun, listenin' to that Fry runt fume when he wakes up and finds out what I've done to him. But I'll be watchin' the south road, yonder, Kate. When I see dust boilin' up, I'll know you and the sheriff are close. I'll slide out of sight before you and Hinkey get here."

"You won't run away, Sam?" Kate asked, and her eyes were pleading.

"For a few days, until Fry quits huntin' me," he nodded. "But I'm leavin' old Sleeper in yore care, Kate. I'll bring yore Big Red back, and swap hosses with yuh, and sorta check up to see how yuh're makin' out with gettin' all of yore ranch back. Run along now, before Fry wakes up and begins to—"

Long Sam did not finish. Kate Benton put her slim arms around his neck, pulled his head down, and kissed him full on the mouth. She smiled up at him in an odd way, then turned and went towards the corrals, hurrying.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 7)

told you about, writes hunting and fishing yarns. He told about a quail-hunting experience in a magazine two-three months back.

Big John and a friend went hunting in a desert canyon where they used to find a lot of birds. They hunted a long ways without sighting anything. Finally they reached the head of the canyon, and there, out of a thicket, they flushed two birds. Both hunters raised their guns. Then they lowered 'em. Neither of them shot, because just then came the sad recollection of days when big coveys were numerous.

In the yarn, Big John told the simple story just as it happened, hoping it would help sportsmen to see the need for conservation and protection of wildlife, where threatened with extinction.

Instead, here's what followed. A reader phoned the magazine editor.

"I want to know," he said, "where those fellows saw those two quail."

"Why do you want to know that?" asked the editor.

"Because," said the gentle reader, "I want to go git 'em!"

We Had "Miseries"

Some ninety-odd years back, when I was only a youngster—it seems that long ago, sometimes—no household was complete without a family doctor book. It was a big, heavy volume that told everything about symptoms, diseases and their treatment, and it was full of gruesome pictures and diagrams of human working parts. It was pretty uncheerful reading, and for that reason nobody ever dug into the book very deep, that I know of. Anyhow, where I lived, folks didn't have fancy diseases. Any affliction that seemed uncommon was simply called a "misery," which we either endured or gave up to.

The family doctor book didn't help anybody keep or get well. Fact is, it did just about the opposite, I think, because just in skimming through, it left you gloomily convinced that you had a dozen or more of the luridly described maladies, and had better call a doctor quick and sudden. In that respect, the family doctor book didn't take any business from the old family physician. It skeered lots of people to him.

Doctors nowadays come in every stripe and

[*Turn page*]

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cut, but the horse-and-buggy doctors of the Western Frontier all looked exactly alike, same as the Smith Brothers. They wore beards, frock coats, pince-nez glasses on a black ribbon and hard-boiled hats. The first thing they made every patient do was stick out his tongue and say ah-hhh. It didn't matter what you had, boils or bunions or a black eye, you had to say ah-hhh.

Then the doctor would say "ah," and nod his head mysteriously, which left you thinking that his worst fears were realized. He prescribed medicine, but practically always you got well after a few doses, leaving the rest on the shelf for some other member of the family to take later on, maybe years later, when took with a disorder that seemed similar.

Those Old Bottles

And now we're getting down to what I'm talking about. I bet every household in the land has a medicine cabinet crammed full of old medicine, some of which has been there so long that nobody remembers what it was for.

So I propose that we celebrate a National Throw-Away-Old-Medicine Week. Get rid of those old bottles—and replace them with fresh, usable first-aid remedies.

I'm told that some medicines lose their potency with age, while others get stronger, up to a dangerous point, which is as good a reason as anybody needs to take it out and pour it down a gopher hole. It's right certain that doctors of yesterday and today would heartily approve of doing that, if for no other reason than that medicine prescribed for one person may well be a very bad thing for another to take.

Offhand I'd say that country folks out West have more old medicine on hand than town or city folks. The reason is, they have more room to stash things in country homes, as a rule, and don't throw away much of anything.

The worst case I know of, among folks that take any old left-over medicine, was a rancher that fixed himself up with a slug of cow salts. They mighty near salted him down for keeps.

The Pill Problem

Pills are specially dangerous to hang onto after you're through taking them, because they can get mixed up with other pills, easy

as not, and also because they might fall into the hands of little Junior, when he's at that age when he pokes everything he finds into his mouth. It's sort of hard for the doctor to figure out what's troubling little Junior when he's got a good jolt of wrong-pillitis.

Doctors have learned a lot since whisker and horse-and-buggy days, at least that's generally agreed. But they have a lot to learn yet, and some real simple things that anybody ought to know without going to medical school.

For one thing, why do doctors stick a showcase full of scary-looking instruments right out where a patient's eyes are glued on it?

The hospital smell of some doctors' offices stampedes a good many folks, including me, myownself. It oughtn't to be too hard to avoid or do away with that, not these days when there are so many good, quick deodorizers.

Of course, there's no disguising the fact that a visit to or from the doctor isn't enjoyment. But that's all the more reason that he should figure out ways to calm down skittish patients.

The Flower-Growing Medico

I knew a doctor who loved to grow flowers, and he always kept a glorious lot of 'em in his treatment room. Flowers have a relaxing effect, taking our thoughts from the harsh realities of life, so I think those flowers helped his patients. He was a wise old doctor, and probably knew that posies were better therapeutics than some pills. And there's another two-bit word to wind up with, which makes this month's issue of TEXAS RANGERS Magazine a mighty fine buy for the price.

There'll be more of the same in our next get-together in this Frontier Post, gals and galluses. Until then, *Adios,* and make sure to come back.

—*Captain Starr.*

OUR NEXT ISSUE

STRONG men battle those who rule by their very ruthlessness in THE SPOILERS' TRAIL, the dramatic Jim Hatfield novel by Jackson Cole which appears in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS.

[*Turn page*]

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Southwest of the Delaware Mountains, in Culberson and Hudspeth counties, is one of the most desolate, yet weirdly beautiful sections in Texas, a vast view of level reaches gray-green with sage and greasewood, with stands of prickly pear, yucca and ocotillo. Streaks of blazing white gleam like hazy silver ribbons encircling shallow cups of turquoise where the salt-encrusted shores of salt lakes follow irregular curves of age-old death and desiccation.

Ragged peaks loom stark against the sky, and sheer wall of rainbow coloring. Deep, narrow canyons split the ridges, their mouths sultry cobalt in the sunshine, black jade when the moonlight falls in a silver flood and the salt-impregnated sands are ghostly white. It is a land of great distances, of great loneliness, of legend and tradition where fact and fancy intertwine and the real and the unreal become one.

Across this land of story and of promise, the energy and genius of James G. "Jaggers" Dunn, empire builder, was uncoiling the steel ribbons of a railroad where those who should know declared a railroad could not be built.

"The time will come," Dunn said to his pessimistic board of directors, "when this region will be a veritable garden. The waters of the streams will be impounded in great lakes and irrigation will make these thirsty sands blossom and burgeon. The fruit and grains of the section will some day be worth far more than the cattle that now flourish on the watered areas of the rangeland. We will tap a store of treasure vaster by far than that visioned by Coronado in his dream of the fabled Seven Cities of jewels and of gold. The road goes through!"

"But what of the Diablo Hills?" they asked. "They lay athwart of the route you have mapped out. You can't go over the Diablos."

"We'll go through 'em," Dunn replied. "They'll not stop us."

A year or so later, at another director's meeting, Dunn spoke again.

"The Diablo Hills aren't stopping us," he said. "We're going through, aren't we? And now we've got our franchise from the legislature, we're going on to Franklin. The devil himself won't stop us."

"Uhhuh, and you'll be up against the devil himself, in the person of Crane Ballard of the M & K," Dunn's secretary-treasurer, a bluff old Texan, predicted. "The M & K ain't goin' to take this lyin' down, Jim. They'll

fight us tooth and nail, and they won't be particular where or how they scratch."

"Let 'em scratch!" growled the empire builder. "Reckon we can claw a mite ourselves if it comes to that. I'll have Crane Ballard bowin' and bendin' to me like a pig over a nut before I've finished with the horned toad."

"Jim, yuh ain't never got over being a cowhand, have yuh?" the old Texan chuckled. "Well, when yuh talk like a cowhand, I feel better. Got a notion we *will* give Ballard his come-uppance before the last hand's dealt, even if he has got a stacked deck up his sleeve."

The other gentlemanly members of the board looked a trifle bewildered as they listened to this passage, but somehow or other they felt better, too. One and all they voted to support the general manager to the last dollar of the treasury.

But the secretary proved himself a prophet with honor in his own country or anywhere else. His prediction of trouble a-plenty was quickly realized. . . .

[*Turn page*]

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Sitting his great golden sorrel on the crest of a rise that seemed to drop down into a black void of nothingness, Jim Hatfield gazed at a cluster that marked the site of the sprawling construction camp that was steel end for the C & P Railroad.

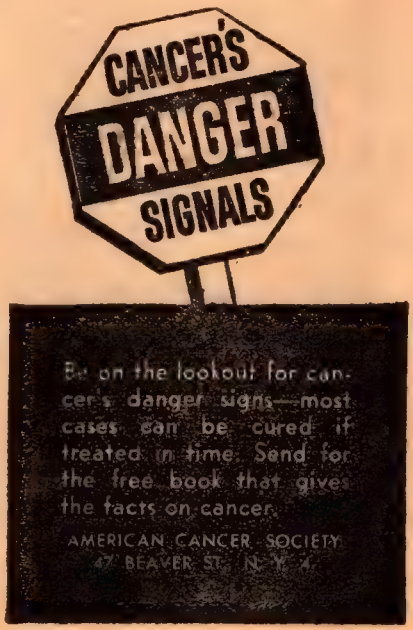
From the south, almost in line with where he sat his horse on the ridge crest, came the ceaseless chatter of the drills, the puffing of locomotives, the thud of mauls and the crash of steel on steel. The night shift was hard at it.

Hatfield turned in his saddle to glance back the way he had come, to where the trail, blue and silver in the moonlight, wound across the hills. He gazed for a moment, then turned back and gathered up the reins.

"Okay, Goldy," he said, "we might as well be ambling. Ought to be something to eat in that town down there beyond the construction camp, and a helping of oats for you. We'll—good gosh almighty!"

One instant the construction camp lay bathed in the white moonlight. The next the buildings were outlined in a reddish glare that paled the lights and seemed to quiver the stars. The hills rocked to a thunderous explosion. For a moment a pall of yellowish smoke hung over the camp site. Then it was shot through by soaring red flames. The landscape was bathed in a baleful sunset glow.

For a crawling moment, Hatfield stared at the holocaust below. Then his voice rang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out, urgent, compelling.

"Hit the trail, feller," he shouted. "All hell's busted loose down there. This needs a mite of looking into!"

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and dislikes we are better able to select the type of stories and features that will appeal to all of you most. Therefore, please keep telling us which stories you liked best in this and other issues of TEXAS RANGERS. Let's take a look at some of the many letters we have been receiving:

I have just finished reading a recent issue of TEXAS RANGERS and it is the best Western magazine I have ever read. RIDERS OF THE DEAD STAR TRAIL and VENGEANCE IS MINE were the stories I liked best.

—Sammy Gibson, St. Charles, Va.

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for about one and a half years now, and I can't find another Western book that's half as good. I think Jim Hatfield is tops. Have just finished THE TOMBSTONE TRAIL. It was swell.

W. M. Rogers, Floyd, Iowa.

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for a good many years. I have just finished reading KING OF THE BRAZOS. It was a very good story. I think Jim should fall in love with Anita Robertson, since she is now living in Austin, and when Jim returns from his trips he can see her. I like the Doc Swap stories very much. Keep putting out your good stories.

—Harold Davis, Parkersburg, W. Va.

Have just finished reading RIDERS OF THE DEAD STAR TRAIL. I think it is the best one so far. The Lone Wolf is a great guy. TEXAS RANGERS is tops in Western magazines.

—Clarence Hampton, San Diego, Calif.

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for three years and think the magazine is great. Why not have more Long Sam Littlejohn stories in the book? I think he's very good. Have just finished THE TOMBSTONE TRAIL; read it all in one day and thought it was swell.

—Herbert G. Simpson, Alexandria, Va.

GOLD OF THE AZTECS, by Jackson Cole in the October issue of TEXAS RANGERS, was the best Western novel I have ever read. Jackson Cole can write rings around most of the names in any of the magazines, I say. I also read RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, RIO KID WESTERN, POPULAR WESTERN, EXCITING WESTERN, MASKED RIDER WESTERN and WEST and I think all of them are tops. TEXAS RANGERS and THE RIO KID are my favorites.

Earnest Tiller, Nokesville, Va.

That's all the letters for this time, but we'll print more of your communications in the next issue. Let's hear from all of our readers! Please address your letters and postcards to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Thanks, everbody! See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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And at the table sat Odile's younger sister, voluptuous Caresse, who drove Leonce to a maddening desire to put an end to his wife so that he could possess her. And Foxworth himself had reasons of his own for wanting Odile out of the way!

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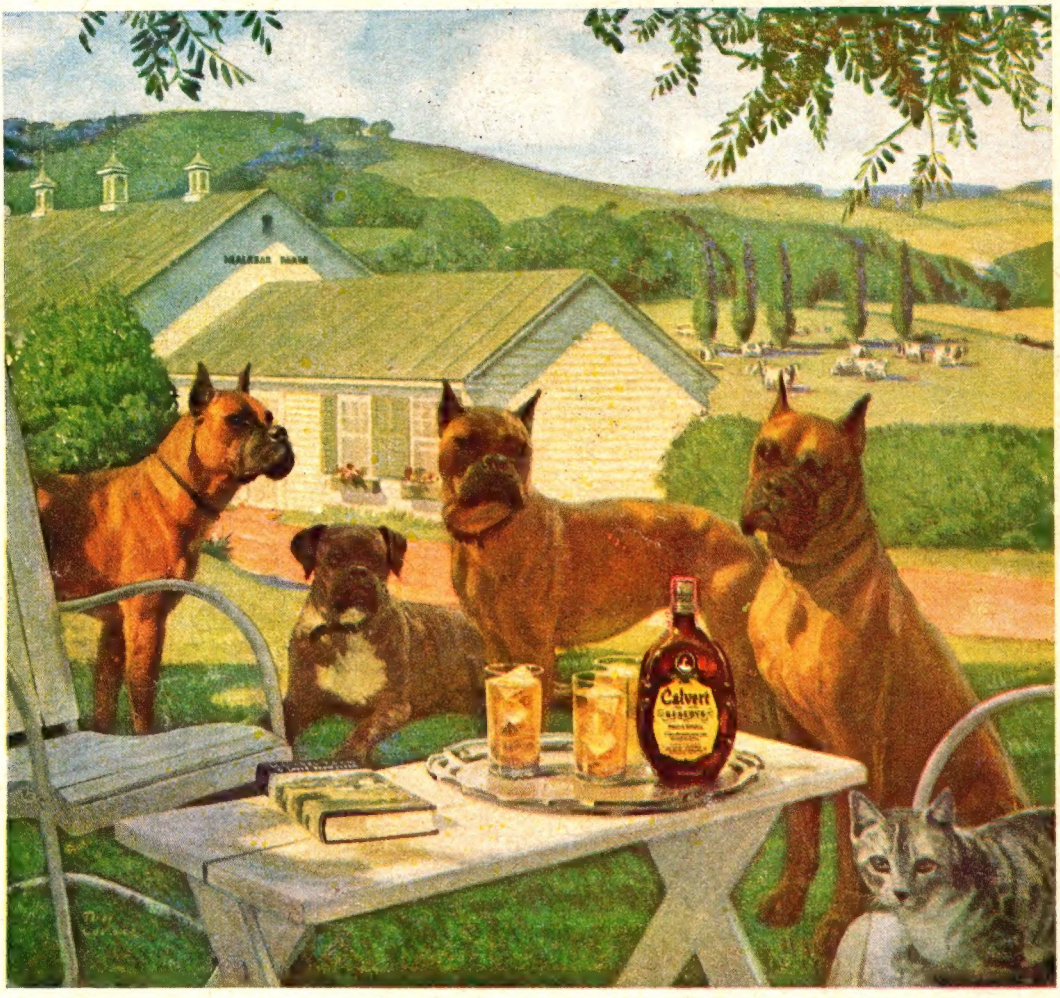

Left to right—"Folly," "Gina," "Baby" and "Rex," favorite boxers of author-farmer Louis Bromfield, at famous Malabar Farm, Lucas, Ohio.

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